

FARM WORKER ISSUES: HEALTH & SAFETY

Farm work is hard work. Farm workers perform repetitive picking motions, bend over for hours at a time, lift heavy buckets of produce, and operate machinery like tractors, pesticide applicators, and fruit pickers that can lead to mishaps and injuries on the job.

For these and other reasons, agricultural is one of the top three most dangerous occupations in the United States. According to the Department of Labor's Bureau of Labor Statistics, "Fatalities involving agricultural workers, including farmworkers and laborers, rose from 127 in 2009 to 156 in 2010."

Long Hours of Hard Work Under a Hot Sun

In addition to physically demanding labor and dangerous machinery, heat and sun exposure make agricultural work especially dangerous. When farm workers work all day under the sun without taking water or shade breaks, they face heat-related illnesses such as nausea, dizziness, heat exhaustion, heat stroke, dehydration, and even death.

Among farm workers, heat stroke is the leading cause of work-related death. A report released by Oxfam and the Farm Labor Organizing Committee (FLOC) in 2011 cites the Centers of Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), stating "During 1992-2006, a total of 68 crop workers died from heatstroke, representing a rate nearly 20 times greater than for all U.S. civilian workers."

By law, the only state that requires water and shade breaks is California. Even in California, though, these laws do not do enough to protect workers. In 2011, a 56-year old worker named Miguel Estrada almost fainted while harvesting corn, and died on the way to the hospital due to heat-related illnesses. In July, another California worker died at age 47 while driving a tractor and harvesting cantaloupes in 102-degree weather. According to the United Farm Workers (UFW), at least 16 California farm workers have died of heat-related causes since 2005.

Furthermore, because farm workers usually get paid by piece, they face economic pressure to skip shade or water breaks in order to earn more money.

Green Tobacco Sickness

In addition to exposure to the hot sun, sometimes even the crops that farm workers harvest can make farm workers sick. For instance, tobacco harvesters, many in North Carolina, face a unique type of illness called Green Tobacco Sickness (GTS). Caused by absorbing a high level of dissolved nicotine through the skin, which happens when workers touch wet tobacco leaves, this illness is characterized by nausea, vomiting, weakness, dizziness, and sometimes an increase in blood pressure and heart rate. The report by Oxfam and FLOC about human rights abuses in NC cites this fact: "Moisture on tobacco leaves from dew or rain may contain as much as 9 mg of dissolved nicotine per 100 ml of dew, roughly equivalent to the nicotine content of six average cigarettes. On a humid day, especially after a recent rain, the average fieldworker may be exposed to as much as 600 ml of dew."

In a vicious cycle, because exposure to high levels of nicotine increases body temperature, tobacco farm workers are thus even more vulnerable to heat related illness and heat stroke.

Toxic Pesticides

While Green Tobacco Sickness is specific to tobacco harvesters, a rampant problem amongst the majority of farm workers is exposure to toxic chemicals from pesticides.

Pesticides—chemicals used to kill pests such as insects, weeds, fungi, or even rodents—are sprayed onto agricultural crops to combat infestations and increase crop production.

Pesticides can be harmful to humans depending on the toxicity of the ingredients, length of time of exposure, and how it enters the body. Farm workers face pesticide exposure both directly and indirectly.

Directly, farm workers can get sprayed while they're picking crops, and they can also be made to re-enter the fields prematurely after the fields have been sprayed, thus getting unsafely exposed to high levels of pesticides.

Indirectly, farm workers are exposed by handling pesticide containers (warning labels of which are still not required to be written in Spanish in addition to English), having skin contact with pesticide residue, when the grower fails to provide water for workers to wash their hands and clothes—a common occurrence, and breathing in “pesticide drift” when the wind spreads chemicals from the crops to neighboring communities.

In this sense, farm workers have no escape from exposure, as pesticides can literally follow them home after work in the form of residue on their clothes, or pesticide drift contaminating the air in their neighborhoods.

Effects of Pesticide Exposure

Pesticide exposure is linked to all kinds of medical and health issues, including but certainly not limited to:

- Reproductive problems
- Birth defects
- Alzheimer's
- Diabetes
- Cancer
- Autism
- Memory loss

Birth Defects: The Story of Carlitos and His Neighbors

The grave effects of pesticide exposure are reflected in the 'Immokalee babies' in Florida, the children of three mothers who were all exposed to pesticides while harvesting tomatoes, and whose children were all born with severe birth defects. The three mothers, expecting children within 2 months of each other, were neighbors who lived within one hundred yards of each other. They worked in the same field, picking tomatoes for the same company: Ag-Mart Produce, Inc.



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The first baby, named Carlitos, was born with a rare condition called tetra-amelia syndrome, leaving him without arms or legs. About six weeks later, a baby named Jesus was born with a lower jaw deformity called Pierre Robin Sequence, necessitating feeding him through a plastic tube to prevent his tongue from falling back into his throat. The third baby, Jorge, was born two days after Jesus, missing a kidney, an ear, a nose, an anus, and any visible sex organs. He was later named a girl, Violeta, but survived for only three days.

The fields where all three women worked had been sprayed by at least thirty-one different chemicals during the growing season, many named “highly toxic” and at least three labeled by Pesticide Action Network (PANNA) as “developmental and reproductive toxins”. Regulations requiring gloves, aprons, and respirators were not enforced; the women wore bandanas over their mouths to try to prevent breathing in the chemicals, but were not warned of the dangers of exposure.

Barriers to Accessing Health Care

The dangerous nature of agricultural work creates a disproportionate number of work-related health concerns for farm workers as compared to other jobs. These include the multiple medical conditions surrounding arduous manual labor, heat and sun exposure, and pesticide-related illnesses. Farm workers lack preventative healthcare and, unfortunately, they also face disproportionately large hurdles in accessing the health care they need.

According to a study by Health Outreach Partners, 67% of those polled reported lack of transportation as the biggest barrier to accessing healthcare amongst farm workers. Because many farm workers live and work in rural communities, they have little to no options for public transportation, and thus could not access healthcare facilities even if they were eligible.

Eligibility is another issue, as documentation status can prevent workers from accessing healthcare. In addition to fear and discrimination caused by immigration status, lack of information exacerbates the problems. Farm workers and migrant health professionals report a lack of awareness of available health services, along with confusion in navigating healthcare providers and public insurance programs. This leads to farm workers waiting until their health problems are unbearable to seek medical attention.

An Issue of Justice

Farm workers work hard in the fields to support themselves and their families as well as to put food on our plates and support our billion-dollar agricultural industry. They deserve access to medical services that address their multiple work-related health concerns. Additionally, farm workers deserve stronger workplace protections, such as water and shade breaks and protection from pesticides.

Pesticide exposure amongst farm workers is an issue of environmental injustice. It's one thing to worry about eating a piece of produce that's been sprayed with pesticides; farm workers are exposed to pesticides all day long, without the choice or ability to avoid exposure, and without a voice in the decisions about pesticide rules and regulations that directly affect the health of their bodies and families.



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For this reason, farm workers and environmental justice organizations are leading campaigns to document cases of pesticide exposure, ban the use of some of the most dangerous pesticides that are actively used in this country, and educate others about the dangers of pesticide exposure and its effects on farm worker communities.

Sources:

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- Pesticide Action Network of North America (PANNA)
- United Farm Workers



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