



National  
Farm Worker  
MINISTRY

## Farm Worker Issues: Environmental Racism

We worked through the cold winters, hot summers, and rain. We endured getting directly sprayed by pesticides that caused blisters and rashes to form on our skin. We endured muck storms and horrible conditions that made us feel less than. Family members who worked on the farm experienced lung disease, kidney failure, and more. Many of the women had miscarriages.

-Linda Lee, former farm worker on her experiences working on Lake Apopka farms.

Environmental racism is the disproportionate impact of environmental hazards on people of color. From temperature changes to natural disasters, farm workers are on the front lines of climate change. Farm workers are also at a disproportionate risk from exposure to pesticides, which can cause short- and long-term illnesses for workers and their families. Although farm workers are often recognized as an environmental justice community, the U.S. government's regulations and policies offer workers little to no protections against environmental hazards.

### **The Case of Lake Apopka**

Beginning in the 1940s, part of Lake Apopka in Florida was drained annually in order to access the rich soil beneath the water – known as muck farming. As a result of this specific type of farming, chemicals from the toxic pesticides that were used would run off into the lake through drainage canals. The pollution got so bad by the 80s and 90s that the lake was deemed a Superfund clean-up site, one of the most toxic and hazardous places in the country, according to our government.

In 1999, the Apopka area experienced a sudden and large-scale death of birds. An investigation by the U.S. Department of Fish and Wildlife determined it was caused by the amount of pesticides in the environment.

Although the pollution of Lake Apopka has been brought to light through various wildlife and conservation efforts, not much has been done to help the farm workers who have been affected by the pesticides that have destroyed the lake and its animal inhabitants. Many of the former farm workers in the area are suffering from serious health issues, such as lupus, but there has been little research done to investigate the correlation between pesticides and farm workers' illnesses. To this day, these farm workers are struggling to receive proper government attention regarding their claims that their ever-prevalent health problems are related to pesticide exposure. There has been a government-funded environmental justice study for the welfare of the birds in the community, but the same expense cannot be spared for those who work the land and feed our nation. Sadly, Lake Apopka is just one example of environmental racism.

## **Pesticide Exposure**

The use of pesticides and other agrochemicals has been a long-time health risk for farm workers, who are twice as likely to die from pesticide poisoning than workers in other occupations. Crop spraying can cause direct exposure, as can re-entering fields prematurely after the fields have been sprayed. Indirectly, farm workers can be exposed by handling pesticide containers (warning labels of which are still not required to be written in Spanish), contact with pesticide residue, and breathing in “pesticide drifts” from neighboring fields. Inadequate training and protective gear, also put farm workers both at immediate risk as well as long-term harm.

Farm workers' families can also be harmed by these toxins. Farm workers and their families are exposed to pesticides in their homes as many live near fields that have been sprayed. Farm workers can also bring the poisonous pesticides home with them on their clothes, shoes, and bodies. Persistent pesticide exposure has been associated with cancer, depression, diabetes, neurodegenerative diseases, and reproductive issues. The lack of access to health care exacerbates the health risks farm workers face. Additionally, farm workers frequently report that they are not being properly trained about pesticides and pesticide safety, even when trainings are required by law.

Climate change is expanding pesticide use as well as its harm. As the temperature rises, pests and weeds multiply, requiring heavier use of pesticides. Rising temperatures also can cause pesticides to evaporate more quickly, making additional application required to achieve the same effect. Warmer temperatures even make some of the pesticides more toxic. For example, the widely used organophosphate pesticides have been shown to increase the rate of chemical transformation into more toxic compounds.

Heat stress is also a compounding factor for farm workers exposed to pesticides. Farm workers can protect themselves from pesticide exposure by using protective clothing but are then more vulnerable to heat stress. The essential protective gear that keeps farm workers safe from pesticides can increase the “feels like” temperature by up to 27°F. 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 danger of pesticide exposure and its effects on farm worker communities.

Since farm workers are predominantly people of color, past and present, embedded racism means they receive less attention, concern, protection, and assistance in relation to the environmental risks described above.

Learn more about issues affecting farm workers at [nfwm.org](http://nfwm.org).