



Farmworkers and Pesticide Exposure in the Apple Orchards

by George Finch

Far from being an idyllic place out in the country, the modern-day apple orchard is more akin to a factory in that very toxic chemicals are used in every phase of production—from the onset of blooming to storage in the warehouse. Orchardists in Washington commonly use a minimum of 12-16 chemicals on their apple crop, but even more may be used. The modern apple is truly a product of modern chemistry.

The recent Alar issue brought this fact to the public's attention and concern, but the health problems posed by Alar are only the tip of the iceberg compared to the exposure and health risks faced by the farmworkers who cultivate and harvest the multi-million dollar Washington State apple crop. For this reason, farmworkers in the state are waging a long-range campaign through Centro Campesino and the United Farm Workers of Washington State to make the apple orchard a safe workplace for farmworkers and their families.

A recent survey by Centro Campesino showed that 118 of 156 farmworkers who were exposed to pesticides were exposed while working in apple orchards. Pesticide residues fall from leaves, branches, and fruit while workers thin apples during the spring and to a lesser degree when they harvest the fruit in late summer and early fall.

Interviews with apple workers indicate that many exhibit such problems as skin, eye, and throat irritations, headache, dizziness, upper respiratory problems, and allergies while thinning and sometimes while harvesting apples. What is not yet known are the long-term consequences of exposure to these pesticides for these workers.

Farmworkers are petitioning the Washington State Department of Labor and Industry to investigate and determine whether or not the apple orchard is a safe workplace and to mandate basic industrial hygiene practices and systems which will reduce exposure and provide immediate and effective treatment for exposed workers.

Unfortunately, for historical and political reasons, the state and federal governments have not considered the farm to be like a modern industrial

setting. If factory workers exhibited the same health problems as apple workers, the state would call for an immediate investigation of that factory. Given the current mood of the apple industry and their support of so-called "right to farm" laws (which would protect farming practices, including pesticide spray drift), Centro Campesino and the UFW of Washington expect a long-term battle to get the state to act on this petition.

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