



## Farmworkers and the Health Risks of Pesticides

by Valerie A. Wilk

Farmworkers are on the front lines of exposure to pesticides. This fact was hammered home to television viewers in Florida on November 15, 1989, when the evening news showed scores of poisoned workers being treated at the Ruskin Community and Migrant Health Center. Thirteen of the 85 farmworkers were so severely poisoned they were transferred to area hospitals. The farmworkers had been sent into cauliflower fields treated with the highly toxic insecticide phosdrin only 19 hours after the fields had been sprayed. The legal reentry time set by the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) for unprotected workers is 48 hours.

Besides poisoning, the farmworker adults and children who harvest our nation's crops risk skin and eye burns, skin rashes, and an array of chronic health problems from their exposure to pesticide sprays and residues in the fields. Ruskin medical director Dr. Dennis Penzell reported that five months after that poisoning, a number of the workers still exhibited symptoms, from headaches and chronic fatigue to more serious nervous system problems. One of the exposed pregnant workers suffered a miscarriage.

Human health studies and case reports published in the United States and abroad have linked pesticide exposure to a variety of chronic health effects.<sup>1</sup> These include: cancers such as leukemia, non-Hodgkin's lymphoma (a lymph node cancer), and multiple myeloma (bone cancer) in adults, and leukemia and brain cancer in children; reproductive effects such as birth defects, spontaneous abortion, sterility, and menstrual dysfunction; liver and kidney dysfunction; nervous system effects, including problems with motor coordination and thought processes, anxiety, and depression; and abnormalities in the immune system.

Pesticide products consist of "active" and "inert" ingredients. The active ingredients are those that are listed on the pesticide label and that kill the target pests. All other substances in the formulation are called "inerts." They include binding agents, solvents, emulsifiers, preservatives, anti-volatility agents, and

contaminants. Because of trade secret protections, "inerts" are not listed on the label. Although these ingredients have no effect on the target pest, they can cause serious harm to humans, and include substances that cause cancer and reproductive or neurotoxic effects such as benzene, carbon tetrachloride, formaldehyde, asbestos, and DDT.

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*Farmworkers and consumers are part of an involuntary human experiment of the effects of pesticides. Today the chemical industry euphemistically calls them "crop protection products," but Rachel Carson called pesticides "elixirs of death."*

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Farmworkers are exposed to these poisons not only in the fields, but also in the food they eat and the water they drink. Sometimes irrigation ditch water, contaminated with pesticides and fertilizers, is the only source of water for workers. Migrant farmworkers often live in labor camps out in the fields, and when the crops are sprayed, pesticides drift over their housing.

Each year some 45,000 pesticide products, weighing 1.2 billion pounds and costing \$6.5 billion, are sold in the United States. About 70% are applied in agricultural production. Registration of a pesticide by the EPA does not mean that the chemical has been fully tested for adverse health effects. Despite the fact that some pesticides have been on the market for 30 years or more, and the EPA has been in existence for almost 20, the General Accounting Office (GAO) reported to Congress in 1989 that EPA had not completed a final assessment on any pesticide, though they were close on three. The surest and most effective way to protect farmworkers against pesticide poisoning and latent devastating

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chronic health problems is to prevent them from being exposed to these poisons in the first place. We can do this in a variety of ways.

We must reduce our dependence on toxic chemicals in agriculture and develop incentives that foster this move away from intensive chemical use. We must strengthen EPA's registration process so that dangerous pesticides are not allowed on the market in the first place. We must see to it that EPA quickly bans pesticides that are too dangerous for worker or consumer exposure.

Reentry times must be long enough to eliminate the risk of farmworker adults and children being poisoned when they go into the fields. Pesticide users must keep records of their pesticide applications, and farmworkers and their health care providers must have the right to know what these chemicals are, including the identity of the secret "inerts," without the fear of employer retaliation. And we must eliminate the use of cancer-causing pesticides on food crops.

Farmworkers and their families must be protected from a harvest of illness, injury, and death from exposure to poisons. Their protection has broader implications for health and safety. As Dr. Marion Moses, occupational medicine physician and consultant to farmworker unions, says, "If farmworkers are protected in the workplace, consumers will be protected in the marketplace."

*1 There have been no long-term health studies of farmworkers to document their health status and exposure to pesticides. This year, however, researchers led by Marion Moses, M.D., are developing such a data base in a study of 400 farmworkers and their families—union members of the Farm Labor Organizing Committee—who migrate from Florida to Ohio.*

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## UFW's Grape Boycott Targets Pesticides

The United Farm Workers union has asked the public not to buy fresh table grapes grown in California until growers have ceased using five of the most dangerous pesticides. The Farmworker Justice Fund is one of the many organizations that has endorsed this boycott.

The grape boycott is aimed at reducing the threat posed by pesticides to farmworkers' health. It is also intended to bring employers to the bargaining table to improve workers' wages and working conditions. Although the initial target of the boycott are the grape growers, the UFW's President, Cesar Chavez, has said that the boycott's ultimate goal is to effect change in the practices of a broader group of employers.

The union's three major demands are: (1) a ban on five of the most dangerous pesticides used in growing grapes (captan, parathion, phosdrin, dinoseb, and methyl bromide); (2) agreement on a joint union/grower testing program for poisonous residues on grapes sold in stores; (3) free and fair union representation elections for farmworkers and good faith bargaining.

For more information contact the United Farm Workers of America, AFL-CIO, Old Highway 58, La Paz, Keene, California 93570 or your local boycott support committee