

Impact on Farm workers

As we seek to support a more sustainable farming system, the welfare of farm workers is an important component. We focus here on issues related to crop production including nursery and greenhouse workers in the United States, although those involved in animal production have similar issues. Although we focus only on US farmworkers, international farmworkers may have similar or more severe issues.



Figure 1. Farm worker exposure to pesticides during application is common

An estimate of about 1.5 million crop farm workers in the US help plant, cultivate, harvest and prepare crops for market or storage.¹ Migrant farm workers travel from place to place to work in agriculture and move into temporary housing while working; seasonal farm workers work primarily in agriculture, but live in one community year-round. Some farm workers are full-time residents and have annual employment on one farm. Estimates of total farm workers are historically difficult because they often work by season or may be hired through a third-party. Up to three-quarters of all crop farm workers may be unauthorized immigrant workers, making official estimates especially difficult.²

Farm worker protection practices. Farm workers have historically been exempt from fair worker practices such as minimum wage and child labor laws making them **largely underpaid** for their labor. They are exempt from the National Labor Relations Act of 1935 which protects workers acting collectively to form a union. The Fair Labor Standards Act initially excluded all farm workers although in 1978 it was amended to include minimum wage standards for workers on large farms only.² Most workers are typically not entitled to overtime benefits, regular rest, or meal breaks. Data collected from 2005 to 2009 showed that about one-third of all farm workers earned less than \$7.25/hour with over three-quarters working less than nine months the previous year.³ One-quarter of all farm workers had total family incomes below the poverty level.³

Child labor is rampant among farm workers; as many as 800,000 farm workers in the US are under the age of 18 years.² Federal laws permit children as young as 12 years to provide farm labor with some limited restrictions on activities and hours worked. However, enforcement of these child labor laws is almost non-existent making it difficult to determine employer compliance with these laws.²

Farm labor **contractors** serve as intermediaries between growers and laborers and are responsible for supplying up to 75% of the farm labor force.⁴ Although regulated by the US Department of Labor under the Migrant and Seasonal Agricultural Worker Protection Act, such contractors' practices are not transparent. Many operate illegally in the US with little threat of interference. Furthermore, farmers use contractors as worker intermediaries to reduce their own supervisory workload. The practice permits some farmers to plead ignorance as to the working

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conditions and wages on their farms. Again, the lack of oversight prevents the collection of valid data to evaluate these contractors' roles in farm worker protection practices.⁴

In addition to the lack of regulatory protection, many farm workers face **daily physical hazards** such as sub-standard housing and unsafe transportation. The Agricultural Workers Protection Act regulates housing and transportation practices for the few farmers that provide these to their workers, however, unsafe practices are reportedly common partly because of weak enforcement. Other issues facing farm workers include lack of unemployment insurance or worker compensation protections, and lack of basic safety standards on farms. Almost 90% of farms are not inspected for basic health and safety violations and almost one-third are not even subject to protection under the Occupational Safety and Health Administration standards.² Because farm workers have exclusivity contracts with some contractors or farm owners, there is the risk of forced labor to avoid deportation. Recent public attention to labor trafficking has revealed abuses in all regions across the country.

Physical and Social Stressors. Farm workers are a largely marginalized population because of their mobility, and some lack fluency in English and official documentation. Recent research suggests widespread **sexual harassment** is another danger to farm workers.² Another major physical hazard that farm workers encounter is **heat stress**.² They work long hours during the high heat of the day and year without adequate shading, cool resting areas and even adequate rest breaks.

Pesticide exposure among farm workers continues to be a major concern. A National Cancer Institute Study found that farmers exposed to herbicides had a six-fold greater risk than non-farmers of contracting various cancers. In California, reported pesticide poisonings among traditional farm workers have risen an average of 14% a year since 1973 and doubled between 1975 and 1985.¹ Field workers suffer the highest risk of occupational illnesses in the state. An estimated 1 million people are poisoned annually by pesticides, and many of these are farm workers, whose poor access to healthcare makes recovery more difficult.¹

Pesticide exposure can affect brain and cognitive development. Recent studies have shown both neurodevelopment problems associated with in utero or early childhood exposures to some pesticides.^{5,6} In a 1998 publication, children living in areas where pesticides were historically

used were shown to have trouble in simple age-appropriate cognitive tasks like drawing a person. Figure 2 compares five year-olds in two areas of Mexico.⁷ Similarly, a study conducted in an agriculturally-dense area of California found that farm worker children exposed to pesticides experienced decreased brain function.^{6,8,9} Even more recent studies suggest that farm worker children have lower IQs.⁸ Though insecticides are designed to be lethal and neurotoxic to pests,



Figure 2. Drawings by Yaqui tribal children in Sonora, Mexico located in the foothill region where pesticides are not applied and in the valley region where pesticides have been historically applied. (Guillette et al. 1998)

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research demonstrating the toxicity of these pesticides to humans is just beginning to be accepted.

Future steps. Despite the unfavorable conditions facing farm workers today, progress is being made in baby steps. For example, several states such as Washington, Oregon and California have been proactive in providing better farm worker protection with special considerations given to heat stress protection, better wages and working conditions, and frequent health monitoring. Furthermore, the US EPA is currently evaluating ways to ensure better compliance with existing standards. The cost of fair wages and improved working conditions has been shown by the Coalition of Immokalee Workers in Florida to be only a few extra pennies a pound of the cost of tomatoes.¹⁰ As eloquently stated in the newly-released *Inventory of Farmworker Issues and Protections in the United States*: “We envision a day when the US public will relate to “fair and safe farm labor” with the same familiarity as they now do to the phrases “organic,” “locally grown,” “animal welfare,” “food safety” and “fair trade.”²

Dana Boyd Barr for the Sustainable Food Committee, December 2011.

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