

IDEAS IN ACTION



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Protect Idaho Farmworkers from Harmful Pesticides

Farmworkers are a crucial part of Idaho's economic success, and integral to our communities. Idaho law leaves farmworkers vulnerable to accidental pesticide exposure, which causes immediate and long-term health problems. Our Legislature can prevent pesticide exposures and protect our workers by clarifying the law. To protect Idaho workers, Legislators should pass a law requiring farms to post notices, in English and Spanish, at the entrances of fields where pesticides have been applied. Employers should also be required to tell workers verbally about pesticide applications.

Exposure to pesticides can cause serious health problems and should be prevented

Pesticide exposure occurs in many ways – when people breathe pesticide spray, touch an object with pesticide on it, or eat or drink something containing or covered in a pesticide. Some pesticides cause serious damage to people after one exposure, while other pesticides cause damage after prolonged or repeated exposures. Some pesticides cause immediate symptoms, including skin or respiratory irritation, nausea, dizziness and diarrhea. Some of these symptoms mimic cold and flu symptoms, so people may not realize at first what is causing them. Pesticide exposure can cause long-term illnesses including cancer and other tumors; brain and nervous system damage; birth defects; infertility and other reproductive problems; and damage to the liver, kidneys, lungs and other body organs.¹

People are exposed to pesticides in many ways. One group of people who are particularly vulnerable to pesticide exposure are farmworkers. Many farmworkers work in different fields every day, for different farmers. They have no way of knowing what has been applied to the fields they work in unless they are told. Farmworkers have many opportunities to be exposed, and repeated exposures have a cumulative effect. Finally, many farmworkers are immigrants. Immigrant farmworkers are at heightened risk of pesticide exposure damage for a variety of reasons: many immigrants do not speak English well enough to understand warnings; immigrants are often afraid to report workplace problems because they do not have the same labor protections as other workers and may fear being deported; and, immigrant workers may not have health insurance or know how to access the health care system. Only twenty-three percent of farmworkers interviewed by the U.S. Department of Labor were covered by health insurance.²

Ramiro Lopez-Caldwell, ID

I had only been working in the fields for about a week when I was exposed to pesticides at work. I remember that I saw people getting sick about early morning, but I did not know why and they didn't say anything. They just kept working. Then I started to get a headache, and my stomach started to hurt. It was a terrible feeling, but I kept working. I did not know why I was feeling sick. I did not know what was happening to me. I'd never worked in the fields before so I didn't know what was going on.

If I had known that they had sprayed pesticides in the field, I would have quit working. But no one told me that it had been sprayed. I quit working because I was so sick that I could not work any more at all. When the firefighters got there and told me to take off my clothes, to bathe me, I did. I did not care because I felt like I was dying.

Idaho law does not do enough to protect farmworkers from exposure to pesticides at work

Like many states, Idaho does not have any law requiring farmers to post notices in fields whenever they apply pesticides. Idaho relies on federal law, which says that farmers can choose between posting warnings in fields where pesticides have been applied and telling workers about applications verbally. For a small group of very toxic pesticides, farmers must do both. Additionally, farmers must post notices in a central location telling workers about all pesticide applications in the past 30 days.

Unfortunately, this rule is not clear enough to protect workers. Workers who do not see signs in the field cannot be sure that there are no pesticides there, because not all pesticides require posting there. Notices in the "central location" may not be accessible to workers who do not enter the office or other place where the notices are posted.

**Silvia M. Saire, Caldwell**

I was exposed to pesticides at work in July. My co-worker, told us that she was feeling sick, so my husband took her to the hospital.

When we finished that field, I went home to get a hoe. My husband was already there. He told me that the hospital nurses showered Leticia to remove the pesticides. He told me to take a shower, but I went back to work because we needed the money to pay our bills. Minutes after I went back to work, I saw Mr. Lopez vomiting. Then I saw someone else in the same situation and I started feeling sick. I felt very weak and that I was going to fall. My heart was beating really fast; I couldn't breathe. I started vomiting.

The firefighters arrived and told me that I had to be naked so they could give me a shower. At first I refused because I didn't want people to see me. But I had no choice; if I did not shower the pesticides would cause more damage. These are some of the injustices that people like me are exposed to every day. We need stronger laws to protect us when we work, and we need the State to enforce the law.



Leticia Silva, Caldwell

My name is Leticia Silva, I'm from Michoacan, Mexico. I'm married and have two kids.

Last year when I was working in a field in Caldwell, we saw an airplane passing by us spraying pesticides without caring that we were there working. The pesticides created a cloud around us, but we thought that the cloud was because of the rain. After a while we started getting sick and eventually they called the ambulance.

In July of 2005, my co-workers and I were exposed to pesticides when we worked in a field that had been sprayed. No one told us about the pesticides, and there were no signs at the field to warn us. A few hours after we started work I started feeling sick. My heart was beating very fast and I felt dizzy and nauseated. I asked a friend to take me to the hospital. At the hospital, they made me take a shower and kept me there until afternoon. When I got back to my house I was feeling a bit better, but I had to go back to the hospital later because I got sick again.

I am worried about returning to the fields because I am afraid that I will be exposed to pesticides again. I do not know what I will do - I came to this country to work and build a better life for my family but now I cannot work at the jobs that are available to me. There are many workers that are in the same situation. We are asking for respect . . . we are human beings and have the right to live with dignity like any other human being.

Farmworkers in Idaho are suffering from exposure to pesticides while at work

No one knows how many farmworkers in the United States, or in Idaho, are exposed to pesticides every year. The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) has used the only data sources available to estimate that in 1999 there were 10,000 to 20,000 incidents of physician-diagnosed pesticide illnesses and injuries of farmworkers every year in the United States. But the EPA recognizes that this number seriously undercounts the number of exposures that actually happen.³ Surveys in Northwest states show how serious the undercounting is: a 1988 survey of farmworkers in Washington State found that 60 percent of workers had been exposed to pesticides, and the average worker had been exposed ten times.⁴ A survey of Oregon farmworkers in 1991 found that over 60 percent had been exposed to pesticides, with over 50 percent seeking medical attention as a result.⁵

In Idaho, farmworkers are exposed to pesticides at work every year. Many of these exposures go unreported. This summer, however, a pesticide exposure incident that sickened 29 workers was reported to state officials and reported in the media. In that incident, workers in an onion field were exposed to three pesticides that had been applied the night before they arrived to work: methomyl, cypermethrin, and mancozeb.⁶ The workers were not told that the pesticides had been applied, and there were no notices posted at the fields.



Angelina Cantor, Marsing

During the summer of 2004, my three children and I were involved in a pesticide incident. We were working in an onion field in Canyon County when an airplane started spraying pesticides on the field adjacent to us. We felt droplets of chemicals fall on our bodies, but we continued working because we were not told to leave. About two hours later, two of my coworkers became very sick. They could not walk and immediately started vomiting. The crew boss gave them lemons to reduce the effects, but this was no match for the chemicals that we had already inhaled.

We all stopped working and left the field. My daughter called 911 and the ambulance arrived. The crew boss told the rest of us to go home and shower. But as the day went on my children and I began to feel numb all over and we all felt nauseated. We became so ill that our bodies gave up and we all fell asleep for the rest of the day.

Idaho Legislators can prevent future incidents by requiring posting of notices in fields

Idaho Legislators can take a simple step to prevent pesticide exposures by requiring that farmers post notices in fields where pesticides have been applied. To be effective, the signs should explain pesticide safety information and emergency information in English and Spanish. When a pesticide has been applied to a field or greenhouse, the owner should be required to post a notice with information about the pesticide that has been applied, where it has

been applied, when, and what day people can enter the field safely. This information should also be posted in English and Spanish. According to a survey by the U.S. Department of Labor, 81 percent of all crop workers reported that Spanish was their native language, and 53 percent said that they could not read English “at all.”⁷

Additionally, employers should be required to tell workers verbally about the pesticide application. Contractors who provide workers to farmers should also be required to tell their workers about pesticides. This simple solution will ensure that workers have access to the information they need. It will also clarify for farmers how to responsibly alert their workers to danger and prevent both exposures and resulting health costs and lawsuits.

Conclusion

Farm workers are exposed to dangerous pesticides every year. Idaho law does not adequately protect workers, and should be changed. The Legislature could prevent pesticide poisoning by requiring farmers to post notices, in English and Spanish, at entrances of fields where pesticides have been applied. Employers should also tell workers verbally. This simple change will protect workers and simplify and clarify the requirements for farmers.

¹ Environmental Protection Agency and Californians for Pesticide Reform.

² Findings from the National Agricultural Workers Survey (NAWS) 2001-2002, Department of Labor, March 2005 (hereinafter NAWS).

³ PESTICIDES Improvements Needed to Ensure the Safety of Farmworkers and Their Children, GAO Report to Congress, March 2000.

⁴ Working with Poisons on the Farm, Caroline Cox, Journal of Pesticide Reform, Fall 1994, vol.14, no. 3.

⁵ Id.

⁶ July 22, 2005 letter from Fred Rios, Bureau Chief, Field Operations, Idaho State Department of Agriculture.

⁷ NAWS.