

Farm work is hard work. Farm workers perform repetitive picking motions, bend over for hours at a time, lift heavy buckets of produce, and operate machinery like tractors, pesticide applicators, and fruit pickers that can lead to mishaps and injuries on the job. For these and other reasons, agricultural is one of the top three most dangerous occupations in the United States. According to the Department of Labor's Bureau of Labor Statistics, "Fatalities involving agricultural workers, including farmworkers and laborers, rose from 127 in 2009 to 156 in 2010."

Pesticides—chemicals used to kill pests such as insects, weeds, fungi, or even rodents—are sprayed onto agricultural crops to combat infestations and increase crop production.



Pesticides can be harmful to humans depending on the toxicity of the ingredients, length of time of exposure, and how it enters the body. Farm workers face pesticide exposure both directly and indirectly.



Directly, farm workers can get sprayed while they're picking crops, and they can also be made to re-enter the fields prematurely after the fields have been sprayed, thus getting unsafely exposed to high levels of pesticides.

Indirectly, farm workers are exposed by handling pesticide containers (warning labels of which are still not required to be written in Spanish in addition to English), having skin contact with pesticide residue, when the grower fails to provide water for workers to wash their hands and clothes—a common occurrence, and breathing in "pesticide drift" when the wind spreads chemicals from the crops to neighboring communities.

In this sense, farm workers have no escape from exposure, as pesticides can literally follow them home after work in the form of residue on their clothes, or pesticide drift contaminating the air in their neighborhoods.

Pesticide exposure is linked to all kinds of medical and health issues, including but certainly not limited to:



- Reproductive problems
- Birth defects
- Alzheimer's
- Diabetes
- Cancer
- Autism
- Memory loss

Farm workers work hard in the fields to support themselves and their families as well as to put food on our plates and support our billion-dollar agricultural industry. They deserve access to medical services that address their multiple work-related health concerns. Additionally, farm workers deserve stronger workplace protections, such as water and shade breaks and protection from pesticides.

Pesticide exposure amongst farm workers is an issue of environmental injustice. It's one thing to worry about eating a piece of produce that's been sprayed with pesticides; farm workers are exposed to pesticides all day long, without the choice or ability to avoid exposure, and without a voice in the decisions about pesticide rules and regulations that directly affect the health of their bodies and families.

For this reason, 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 dangers of pesticide exposure and its effects on farm worker communities.

In addition to physically demanding labor and dangerous machinery, heat and sun exposure make agricultural work especially dangerous. When farm workers work all day under the sun without taking water or shade breaks, they face heat-related illnesses such as nausea, dizziness, heat exhaustion, heat stroke, dehydration, and even death. Among farm workers, heat stroke is the leading cause of work-related death. A report released by Oxfam and the Farm Labor Organizing Committee (FLOC) in 2011 cites the Centers of Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), stating "During 1992-2006, a total of 68 crop workers died from heatstroke, representing a rate nearly 20 times greater than for all U.S. civilian workers."

Farm workers usually get paid by piece, they face economic pressure to skip shade or water breaks in order to earn more money. Most farm workers are paid based how many buckets or bags they pick of whatever crop they harvest—this is known as the “piece rate.” Payment in this format has some drawbacks. To compensate for this problem, as of 1966, federal law requires employers on large farms to pay minimum wage if a worker doesn’t earn it based on the piece rate. Unfortunately, there are loopholes to this system.

| Date       | Type   | Hours | Pieces | Rate  | Deductions | Earnings |
|------------|--|-------|--------|-------|------------|----------|
| 04/24/2011 | Subway's FFP                                 |       | 1      | 28.50 |            | 28.50    |
| 04/24/2011 | McDonald's FFP                               |       | 1      | 44.41 |            | 44.41    |
| 04/24/2011 | Fair Food Payt.                              |       | 1      | 8.81  |            | 8.81     |
| 04/25/2011 | Payroll - Harvest Labor - Picking Piece Work |       | 15     | .60   |            | 9.00     |
| 04/25/2011 | Payroll - Harvest Labor - Picking Hourly     | 11.25 |        | 7.25  |            | 81.56    |
| 04/26/2011 | Payroll - Harvest Labor - Picking Piece Work |       | 11     | .60   |            | 6.60     |
| 04/26/2011 | Payroll - Harvest Labor - Picking Hourly     | 11.50 |        | 7.25  |            | 83.38    |
| 04/27/2011 | Payroll - Harvest Labor - Picking Piece Work |       | 12     | .60   |            | 7.20     |
| 04/27/2011 | Payroll - Harvest Labor - Picking Hourly     | 12.00 |        | 7.25  |            | 87.00    |
| 04/28/2011 | Payroll - Harvest Labor - Picking Piece Work |       | 14     | .60   |            | 8.40     |
| 04/28/2011 | Payroll - Harvest Labor - Picking Hourly     | 12.25 |        | 7.25  |            | 88.81    |
| 04/29/2011 | Payroll - Harvest Labor - Picking Piece Work |       | 13     | .60   |            | 7.80     |
| 04/29/2011 | Payroll - Harvest Labor - Picking Hourly     | 9.75  |        | 7.25  |            | 70.95    |
| 04/30/2011 | Payroll - Field Clean Up Piece Work          | 6.25  | 68.49  | 1.20  |            | 82.19    |
| Totals:    |  |       |        |       |            | 094      |

For one, about one-third of the nation’s farm workers work on small farms, and these are not subject to federal law surrounding minimum wage. If a farm worker is hired through crew leaders or farm labor contractors, which approximately one half of all farm workers are, then their growers can avoid state and federal-level employment laws, including minimum wage. Another common issue amongst farm workers is wage theft, in which a portion of a worker’s wage is stolen by their employer or supervisor. Unfortunately, oversight on this is lax.