

Farmworkers Seek Training About Pesticide Safety

NEWTON GROVE—The sun has set when five farmworkers trudge back to their migrant labor camp in southern Johnston County. They've just toiled 14 hours in the fields planting sweet potatoes. They haven't had time to shower, eat dinner, or change out of their dusty work clothes. Yet they've gathered in a mobile home for a training class.

The class is about pesticide safety. It's being taught by the Farmworkers Project, a Benson-based nonprofit group. Project director Victoria Martinez says her group organizes such training sessions because few farmers teach their migrant workers about safe pesticide use—although a new federal law will require such training starting Jan. 1, 1995.

"The general rule is that they never receive any training on pesticides," Martinez says. "We try to educate farmworkers about the health hazards of pesticides and also make them aware of what the law requires."

Martinez and her assistant, Antonia Ventura, take about 45 minutes to deliver their presentation—all in Spanish. They use colorful posters depicting the symptoms of

pesticide poisoning and showing workers how to avoid such problems. The five Mexican laborers pay close attention to the presentation, frequently interrupting with questions—while a pot of chili simmers on the stove. They're still asking questions when the session ends about 9:15 p.m.

Farmworker advocates say such training sessions are needed because farm laborers are among those most vulnerable to potential health problems related to pesticide exposure. Most farmworkers, they say, have first-hand experience with pesticide-related illnesses or know others who have gotten sick.

"Farmworkers every year suffer from pesticide poisoning," says Caroline Cardona, a health educator with Farmworkers Legal Services of North Carolina, a nonprofit group based in Newton Grove. "Every month and every day that people have to wait [for training], there will be more sicknesses and injuries."

Pesticide poisoning can be hard to identify because the symptoms vary and often mimic other sicknesses. Common symptoms

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take a sample in a valid way, you would get just about as much information—and you wouldn't burden everybody. We need to have information on pesticide use. . . . More information will help the farmers as well as the general public."

FOOTNOTES

¹7 Code of Federal Regulations 110.19014.

²U.S. Department of Agriculture regulations specify that violators will be fined not more than \$500 for initial violations and at least \$1,000 for additional violations.

³Arnold Aspelin, et al., *Pesticide Industry Sales and Usage: 1990 and 1991 Market Estimates*, U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, Office of Pesticide Programs, Washington D.C., 1992, Publ. No. H-7503W, pp. 1-11.

⁴*Ibid.*

⁵*Ibid.*, p. 3.

⁶See National Research Council, *Pesticides in the Diets of*

Infants and Children, National Academy Press: Washington, D.C., 1993, p. 15.

⁷See George W. Ware, *The Pesticide Book*, Thomson Publications: Fresno, Calif., 1994, p. 6.

⁸Tobacco was North Carolina's largest crop in 1992, with \$1.05 billion in cash receipts. Other leading crops, by rank, included: (2) greenhouse and nursery stock, \$317 million; (3) soybeans, \$201 million; (4) corn, \$194 million; (5) cotton, \$144 million; (6) peanuts, \$126 million; (7) wheat, \$83 million; and (8) sweet potatoes, \$40 million.

⁹See Leonard P. Gianessi, "A National Pesticide Usage Data Base," 1986, and L.P. Gianessi and Cynthia Puffer, "Herbicide Use in the United States," 1990. Both studies published by Resources for the Future, 1616 P Street, NW, Washington D.C., 20036; telephone (202) 328-5000.

¹⁰From an unpublished report, "Pesticide Use Estimates in North Carolina in 1987," prepared for the N.C. Department of Agriculture.

¹¹For the latest report, see *North Carolina Agricultural Statistics*, N.C. Department of Agriculture and U.S. Department of Agriculture, 1993.

¹²N.C.G.S. 143-437.3.

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include nausea, dizziness, sleeplessness, profuse sweating, skin rashes, and breathing difficulties. Farmworkers say such problems frequently occur after they've worked in fields such as tobacco that have been freshly sprayed with pesticides.

"When we come through, the leaves are still wet," says Irineo Garcia, a migrant worker from Michoacan, Mexico. "A lot of people get sick. We couldn't sleep at night, because when you lay down the house goes around and around. . . . When I used to work in tobacco, I got sick every year. That's one reason I quit."

Garcia's friend, Salud Solorio, also quit working in the fields, in part because of concerns about his health. Solorio spent over 30

years picking crops on farms in California, Florida, Michigan, and North Carolina. Yet he says none of those employers ever trained him about pesticide safety. "No, never," he says emphatically.

That situation was supposed to change in April 1994, when the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's new farmworker protection regulations were supposed to take effect. But Congress delayed implementation of the rules until Jan. 1, 1995, in response to complaints from farmers and state agricultural agencies—including the N.C. Department of Agriculture.

The EPA's **Worker Protection Standard**¹ is aimed at protecting the estimated 3.9 million agricultural workers and others who are exposed to pesticides through their jobs. The regulations apply to pesticide handlers as well as workers in treated fields, greenhouses,

forests, and nurseries. Under the rules, employers must provide workers with basic pesticide safety training, notify workers when applying pesticides, and post signs summarizing basic information about pesticide safety and first aid. Farmers also are supposed to restrict entry to fields for minimum time periods following pesticide applications, depending on the toxicity of the chemicals used.

"You could say that the meat of it has been delayed," Cardona says of the regulations. Definitely, that's a mistake. The vast majority of farmworkers have not received any sort of pesticide safety training. It seems that it ought to be a basic right that if you put someone in a hazardous situation, that you must train them how to act safely."



Tom Mather

Victoria Martinez, director of the Farmworkers Project in Benson, conducts a training session on pesticide safety.

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—ALAN YORK, EXTENSION SPECIALIST AT N.C. STATE UNIVERSITY
CHAIRMAN OF THE N.C. PESTICIDE ADVISORY COMMITTEE

Agricultural interests sought the delay because they said they needed more time to develop educational materials and train instructors. The EPA was supposed to provide model training materials to the states, but still hasn’t completed them. Plus, much of the training must be conducted in Spanish, because many farmworkers are migrant laborers from Mexico and other Central American countries.

“There’s been a lot of concern from farmers, and rightfully so,” says Alan York, an extension specialist at N.C. State University and chairman of the state Pesticide Advisory Committee. “This is a very major undertaking for them, and it’s a situation where the state doesn’t have a lot of choice.”²

Cardona, however, doesn’t buy those arguments. “These regulations have been in the making for the past nine or 10 years,” she says. “So, it’s not like the growers, the commodity groups, and the states did

not know this was coming down. In my opinion, that’s a lame excuse. Anyone who’s subjected to hazardous materials has a right to know that and at least know how to protect themselves.”

—Tom Mather

FOOTNOTES

¹ 40 Code of Federal Regulations, Part 170.

² As quoted by Stuart Leavenworth, “State board may delay implementation of federal pesticide rules,” *The News & Observer*, Raleigh, N.C., Nov. 9, 1993, p. 1A.



Caroline Cordona, a health educator with Farmworkers Legal Services of N.C. in Newton Grove, says most migrant workers never receive any training about pesticide safety.

Tom Mather