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Safety & Health

Farmworker Group Urges EPA to Revise Protection Standard for Pesticide Exposure



By Patrick Ambrosio

The Environmental Protection Agency should strengthen its agricultural worker protection standard to provide farmworkers with additional information on pesticides to which they might be exposed, according to a new report released by the advocacy group Farmworker Justice.

The July 15 report recommended that the agency revise the worker protection standard to require improved safety training for farmworkers, establish a method that allows workers to verify that they comprehend safety information, improve hazard communication about the specific pesticides to which workers are exposed, and create a meaningful enforcement mechanism for pesticide violations that put workers at risk.

Farmworker Justice is one of 18 organizations that sent a letter to EPA in February calling for revisions to the worker protection standard, which can be found in federal regulations at 40 C.F.R. part 170.

The report said the current worker protection standard, which has not been updated in more than 20 years, has not been effective in preventing farmworkers from being exposed to pesticides.

EPA estimates that up to 20,000 farmworkers are poisoned through pesticide exposure each year, although Farmworker Justice said that estimate is likely too low because of the absence of a national incident reporting system and the inability of affected workers to access quality health care.

The report also addressed the risk of exposure faced by agricultural workers' families, who often live in close proximity to fields where pesticides are sprayed and who can be exposed through pesticide residues on clothing that is not properly decontaminated before the worker arrives home.

Farmworker Justice said agricultural workers are the only group not covered by federal right-to-know regulations that require employers to inform their employees of the health effects of specific chemicals that they handle.

Differences in Protection

The worker protection standard only requires farmworkers to receive general information about pesticides, while the hazardous communication standard of the Labor Department's Occupational Safety and Health Administration requires that covered workers receive training and written information on the short-term and long-term effects associated with specific chemicals.

"No valid justification exists for excluding farmworkers from this protection," the report said.

An EPA representative told BNA July 17 that the agency is working on a rulemaking that would revise the agricultural worker protection standard to reduce the risk of adverse effects to worker health from the use of agricultural pesticides. EPA is working to release a proposed rule on the worker protection standard in late spring 2014, the representative said.

The agency said the proposed revisions will be based on discussions with the Pesticide Program Dialogue Committee and meetings with "a diverse spectrum" of interested parties, including farmworker advocacy groups.

"The proposed rule will work to reduce and prevent harmful exposures and health risks to children and

those disproportionately impacted," the representative said.

The representative cited a number of issues that EPA is working to address, including:

- minimum age for handlers of pesticides;
- training on preventing "take-home" exposures that result in workers' families being exposed;
- notification of areas treated with pesticides;
- decontamination requirements;
- personal protective equipment;
- hazard communications;
- emergency assistance; and
- improved enforcement capability.

Advocacy Group Optimistic

Virginia Ruiz, director of occupational and environmental health with Farmworker Justice, told BNA July 17 that she is "optimistic that things are finally starting to move forward" on revisions to the worker protection standard.

Ruiz said officials with the EPA Office of Pesticide Programs (OPP) told her in meetings that revising the worker protection standard is the office's "priority," although she noted that the officials prefaced those remarks with discussion of budget difficulties that the office is going through.

She said the officials indicated that recent budget cuts are "limiting" what OPP is able to accomplish.

OPP has delayed work on its pesticide reregistration program and slowed hiring because of an approximately \$15 million cut to the office's annual budget, according to a recent presentation by OPP Deputy Director Marty Monell.

Ruiz added that Farmworker Justice and a group of farmworkers were "pleased" with the reception they received earlier this week in meetings with officials from EPA, the Agriculture Department, and congressional offices. The goal of the meetings was to raise awareness of the disparity between farmworkers and workers in other industries with respect to chemical safety protections, Ruiz said.

Push for Label Translation

The Farmworker Justice report contains several additional recommendations for EPA, including one that the agency require pesticide product labels to be translated into Spanish.

Most farmworkers are native Spanish speakers. The inclusion of Spanish translations on the pesticide label would ensure that vital safety information is accessible by farmworkers, many of whom are unable to read English, according to the report.

Ruiz said "at a minimum" information on first aid, personal protective equipment, and health and safety should be translated into Spanish on product labels. She said translating label language should not be difficult for EPA and pesticide manufacturers.

The report also suggested that EPA require medical monitoring of workers who regularly handle neurotoxic pesticides, require reporting of pesticide use and poisoning incidents, impose buffer zones around residential and public areas to protect farmworker families from pesticide spray drift, and expand research on the long-term effects of pesticide exposure on farmworker health.

For More Information

Text of the report is available at <http://op.bna.com/dlrcases.nsf/r?Open=kpin-99qr7>.

Contact us at <http://www.bna.com/contact/index.html> or call 1-800-372-1033

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