

FROM THE GROUND UP

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SAF

STUDENT ACTION WITH FARMWORKERS

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Focus on Occupational Safety and Health



Left 1994 SAF intern Pedro Ortega holding a bilingual sign warning against pesticides *Photo by SAF Intern*



Right Workers loading tobacco leaves into a curing shed. *Photo by SAF Intern*

Occupational Safety and Health Facts

According to a 2001 monograph published by the National Center for Migrant Health, farmworkers are "at a much greater risk of death than workers in every other industry except construction." The document, titled *Environmental/Occupational Safety and Health*, divided these injuries into the following categories: Ergonomic Conditions/musculoskeletal injuries, traumatic injuries, respiratory problems, dermatitis, infectious diseases, cancer, eye problems, and pesticide exposure. Here are some of the facts:

Fatalities: Agricultural crop and livestock production, combined with agricultural services, accounted for 13% of all occupational deaths from 1994-1999, while only covering 2% of overall employment (Bureau of Labor Statistics BLS, 2000).

Ergonomic Conditions: Back and neck pain are the most common type of chronic pain encountered, with over 40% of workers leaving their jobs because of the pain they experienced. Contributing factors: poorly designed tools, lack of training, and long work hours.

Traumatic Injuries: Includes crushing from farm equipment, accidental slicing with hand tools, transportation injuries, and falls (31% of total).

Respiratory Problems: Irritants include pesticides, dust, plant pollen, and molds. These hazards can be worsened by poorly ventilated spaces and smoking.

Dermatitis: Causes include plants that scratch the skin, allergies, chemical exposure, etc. Over 1/2 of tobacco workers experience green tobacco sickness each season. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, skin disorders account for almost half of all occupational illness in agriculture.

Infectious Diseases: Deficient sanitation at work and residence sites along with poor or contaminated drinking water are contributors to tuberculosis and parasitic diseases.

Cancer: A high prevalence of various cancers found among farmworkers may be caused by exposure to known carcinogens and constant exposure to sun.

Eye Problems: Dust, pollen, and chemicals that farmworkers are exposed to can cause eye problems, as well as mechanical factors such as tree branches and tools.

Pesticide Exposure: Every review of occupational health issues for agriculture lists pesticide exposure. Although this is well-documented, the effects of long-term exposure are not well understood. Also, clinicians receive little training on the diagnosis and treatment of pesticide related illness.

Source: Environmental/Occupational Safety and Health. Alice Larson, Ph.D., Natl. Center for Migrant Health, 2001. www.ncfh.org

