

# Farmworkers deserve better pesticide rules

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More than 1 billion pounds of poisonous pesticides are applied on farms annually in the United States, resulting in as many as 20,000 physician-diagnosed poisonings annually among agricultural workers. University of Oregon environmental studies scholar Sarah Wald puts the number of farmworkers exposed to toxic levels of pesticides closer to 300,000, more than 10 times the official number.

A 2008 report by the state Department of Agriculture showed that 15.5 million pounds of pesticides were applied on Oregon farms. Many pesticide applications occur near farmworkers and their families, including young children, putting them at higher risk of health problems such as infertility, birth defects, neurological damage, cancer and death.

Two studies by researchers at Oregon Health & Sciences University concluded that low doses of pesticides over time can cause measurable loss of memory and other brain functions. Harmful pesticides also accumulate in substandard farmworker housing, posing additional risks to workers and their families.

The public rarely sees the dilapidated shacks, with their open cinder-block kitchens, showers and laundry facilities, where Oregon farmworkers live due to a well-documented history of community opposition to safe and affordable farmworker housing. This history is worsened by agricultural employers' tendency to locate housing among orchards and fields, away from public roads.

The state Occupational Safety and Health Division, or Oregon OSHA, is considering how to implement new federal protection standards for farmworkers. Adopted in 2015 by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, these standards represent the first improvements in federal farmworker protections in a quarter of a century.

A pesticide application exclusion zone is a key provision of these new standards. The exclusion zone spans a radius of 100 feet in all directions from an air blast or aerial spray of pesticides. The EPA chose a 100-foot zone after a lengthy evaluation of medical and economic data. The EPA concludes that the exclusion zone will help reduce health risks for workers and their children, especially through pesticide drift from fields and orchards onto farmworker housing.

Oregon OSHA's mission is to advance and improve workplace safety and health. The agency has a particularly important duty to protect the state's farmworkers and inspect the quality of an estimated 309 farm-labor camps in Oregon where more than 9,200 people reside.

In contrast to its mission and contrary to the recommendations of the EPA, Oregon OSHA is proposing a "compliance alternative" that eliminates the 100-foot application exclusion zone around worker housing when people are present. Instead, the agency recommends that workers and their families stay inside their poorly sealed shelters when pesticides are being sprayed, euphemistically calling this practice "sheltering in place."

Peer-reviewed studies show that substandard and crowded farmworker housing does not adequately protect these workers and their families from contact with pesticide drift and fumes.

OSHA is further proposing that when highly volatile pesticides are sprayed, workers and their families evacuate their houses to locations 150 feet away and wait 15 minutes before returning. These volatile pesticides require applicators to wear protective respiratory masks because breathing the fumes can result in serious injury, and even death.

It is unclear whether these same requirements would apply to the teachers, social workers and health practitioners who regularly visit these workers and their families.

Under Oregon OSHA's proposal, as people huddled 150 feet away, their living areas would be exposed to concoctions of multiple harmful pesticides, leaving residue on toys, eating areas, laundry lines, doorknobs, shoes — and the list goes on.

Gov. Kate Brown's Environmental Justice Task Force advises state agencies to conduct a detailed analysis of demographic, environmental and health data to identify adverse effects on communities. The extent to which Oregon OSHA has considered the possible adverse impacts of this proposed rule is inconsistent with task force guidelines.

Despite having data about the registered agricultural labor housing camps, Oregon OSHA made no estimate of the number of housing units falling within an application exclusion zone. Nor has the agency considered the medical costs associated with pesticide exposure to workers, their families and the public.

As Oregonians, we can do better. We have the power to ensure safe, sustainable working conditions for all Oregonians.

Oregon OSHA can require the 100-foot no-spray buffer zone around farmworker housing as an effective way to minimize worker exposure. We hope caring Oregonians let the agency know that its proposed changes to pesticide buffer zones are bad for agriculture and bad for Oregon.

Oregon OSHA will accept public comments until Dec. 15. Contact Beyond Toxics ([beyondtoxics.org](http://beyondtoxics.org) or 541-465-8860) for more information, and for a van ride to attend the public hearing in Medford at 6 p.m. on Tuesday.

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