

# Mail Tribune

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## **Guest Opinion: Oregon OSHA reduces a federal pesticide protection standard**

**By Ray Seidler and Lisa Arkin**

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What if you and your family were exposed 24 times every summer to hazardous pesticides inside your home and the areas where you cook, eat, play and rest, without your consent? This would be unthinkable to most of us. For farmworkers in Oregon this is the law, or it will be if we don't take action — now.

The Oregon Occupational Safety and Health Administration is holding two official public hearings on Worker Protection Standards at 11 a.m. and 6 p.m. Tuesday, Dec. 5, at the Medford Library. The hearings provide the Southern Oregon community an opportunity to voice their concerns about OSHA's proposal to reduce the already minimal federal worker safety rules for pesticide protection of farmworkers.

Pesticides are the 10th leading cause of poisoning exposure reported to poison control centers in the United States, with as many as 20,000 physician-diagnosed pesticide poisonings each year among agricultural workers. In Oregon, where pesticide reporting and protection rules are weaker than in other states, farmworkers and their families face a high risk of disease and illness from everyday exposures to vapors and residues of highly dangerous chemicals.

In 2015, the EPA considered medical and economic analyses before adopting laws to reduce the adverse effects of pesticides on the health of workers and their families. The pesticide Application Exclusion Zone (AEZ) is a key provision of this law, which states that workers or "other" people cannot be within 100 feet during an active pesticide spray. The EPA designated 100 feet as a minimal preventative no-spray zone to protect vulnerable farmworkers. However, Oregon OSHA will eliminate the 100-foot AEZ no-spray area around

farmworker housing and instead require workers and family members to “shelter in place” inside workers’ cabins. Sometimes these dwellings are as close as 15 feet from the crop or tree being sprayed.

However, sheltering within substandard worker housing does not provide adequate protection: Farmworker housing is seldom airtight, and often has leaky walls, windows and doors that fail to protect from outside spray drift. The ruling does not address the accumulation of pesticide residues on cooking and eating areas or children’s play areas, the length of time to shelter, or who will monitor the “shelter time period.” These are critical considerations when just breathing the vapors of some common agricultural pesticides can cause death.

We believe the 100-foot application exclusion zone restriction is insufficient. Compare this rule to the law requiring a more restrictive pesticide application exclusion zone of 300 feet for streams with salmon and steelhead, based on analyses of scientific data showing pesticide particles and hazardous vapors drift substantial distances from spray areas. OSHA is obviously not recognizing such data if they believe that “sheltering in place” within mere feet of a pesticide application can provide sufficient protection for people living and working on farms.

Europe has banned five pesticides commonly used in Oregon agriculture including paraquat, linked to Parkinson’s disease; 1,3-D, banned for being a carcinogen; atrazine, banned for causing reproductive changes; chlorpyrifos, causing brain damage and birth defects; and neonicotinoids, insecticides extremely persistent in drinking water and highly toxic to fish and pollinators.

There are 309 registered farm labor camps and nearly 10,000 people living in Oregon’s farmworker housing. OSHA, whose mission is to protect the health and safety of all workers, is failing to protect farmworkers. It is shocking that the agency proposes a “shelter in place” rule in lieu of a buffer zone, when, by their own estimates, agricultural spray events may occur two dozen terrifying times a summer, and farmworkers and their families will be subjected to hiding or fleeing from pesticides sprayed a few feet from their beds.

Attend these two meetings and let’s tell Oregon OSHA that a shelter-in-place rule is just wrong. We demand justice and safety for the people who plant and harvest our food — especially when toxic chemicals active at parts per billion are

floating through the air.

— *Ray Seidler of Ashland is a retired U.S. Environmental Protection Agency senior research scientist. Lisa Arkin, executive director of Beyond Toxics in Eugene, served as a member of the OSHA rules stakeholder group.*



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