

Don't spray farmworkers

 [registerguard.com/rg/opinion/36225653-78/dont-spray-farmworkers.html.csp](https://www.registerguard.com/rg/opinion/36225653-78/dont-spray-farmworkers.html.csp)

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, in its first update of worker protection standards in a quarter of a century, determined that agricultural laborers should be protected against pesticide exposure by 100-foot buffer zones. It's up to the states to implement the standards, and Oregon's worker safety agency is considering a rule that would violate the spirit, if not the letter, of the EPA's protective zone. Oregon should do more to ensure the health and safety of farmworkers — particularly those who live, often with their families, in housing located near the orchards and fields where pesticides are routinely applied.

The Oregon Occupational Safety and Health Division proposes a rule that would ask people living in farmworker housing that is within a pesticide buffer zone to “shelter in place” when pesticides are applied. In other words, when the helicopter passes overhead or the spray rig passes within a few feet of farmworkers' housing, agricultural laborers would be expected to stay inside. Oregon OSHA's approach assumes that farmworkers' housing always has doors and windows that seal tightly, and that toys, laundry and barbecue grills are never left outside.

When particularly noxious chemicals are used near farmworkers' housing — those that can be applied only by someone wearing a respirator — Oregon OSHA's rule would require that the occupants evacuate to a location at least 150 feet away from the spray area, and remain there at least 15 minutes. This assumes that the residue from the pesticides considered most harmful to human health becomes benign after a quarter of an hour, and after 15 minutes it doesn't matter how much residue is tracked into farmworkers' housing or remains on yards where children play.

At public hearings on Oregon OSHA's proposed rule, farmworkers and their advocates have pointed out that the state requires a 300-foot buffer between pesticide applications and salmon-bearing streams. They argue that the estimated 9,000 people who live in farmworker housing in Oregon for at least part of the year deserve at least as much protection against pesticide exposure as fish.

Other states have implemented the EPA's new standard as the federal agency must have intended, with buffer zones of 100 feet or more around farmworker housing. Exposure to hazardous agricultural chemicals is a serious public health problem — physicians report 20,000 cases of exposure each year, and the actual number is undoubtedly much higher.

Farmers and orchardists don't like no-spray buffer zones, because they eat into the area that can be chemically treated to stop or prevent pests and diseases. But the public health effects of pesticide exposure must also be considered. Even if buffer zones are considered in strictly economic terms, the rising cost and decreasing availability of farm labor should induce the agriculture industry and the state to do more to protect the health of farmworkers

and their families.

Public comment on the rule will be accepted until Dec. 15 at the Department of Consumer and Business Services/Oregon OSHA, 350 Winter Street NE, Salem Ore., 97301-3882, or via email at tech.web@oregon.gov. Oregonians should speak up for the people who turn the wheels of the state's agricultural industries.

More [Editorial](#) articles »