

PESTICIDES

On the Farm



A FARM WORKER'S GUIDE TO PESTICIDES

This booklet should be read along with “Pesticides and Your Health” – a booklet that describes the health risks associated with pesticides

Each year on farms throughout British Columbia farmers and farm workers work with and around pesticides. There are different kinds of pesticides: herbicides (which kill weeds), insecticides (which kill insects), fungicides (which kill molds) and other chemicals that kill pests. Many of these pesticides are powerful poisons; some contain chemicals known to cause cancer, reproductive problems and other serious health problems.

Scientists who wonder about the health risks of pesticides often study people who work on farms, because they are probably exposed to more pesticides than most people. This research shows that farmers and farm workers, and their families, are more likely than most people to suffer from certain types of health problems, including some types of cancer, reproductive issues and diseases of the nervous system.

A note to farmers and farm labour contractors

This booklet is written for farm workers – but we hope that it will be of interest to farmers and farm labour contractors as well. Farmers are just as vulnerable to pesticide exposure as their workers. Moreover, responsible farmers and contractors may want to use the information in this booklet to meet their legal obligations. According to the law, both contractors and farmers are employers – equally and jointly responsible for providing the training, equipment and workplace safety measures discussed in this booklet.

Farmers who need help implementing the obligations discussed in this booklet may apply for assistance from WorkSafeBC or from the Farm and Ranch Safety Association.

Who is at Risk?

Everyone working with and around pesticides is at risk, even if they don't handle them.



In fact, workers who don't handle pesticides sometimes have higher levels of pesticide exposure than the workers who mix and apply them. This is because applicators have special equipment and training to protect them from the pesticide. In many cases, pickers or pruners may have more skin or air contact with pesticides than applicators.

Pesticide levels inside the homes of farmers and farm workers can be higher than in homes of non-farmers. Farmers and workers carry pesticides home on their clothes and boots. When they come home, the pesticides on their clothes start to break down slowly, exposing the workers' family to small amounts of these harmful chemicals.

Protecting Yourself

We hope that this booklet will help protect farm workers from exposure to pesticides. It explains the steps you can take to protect yourself and the laws that your employer must obey to help you avoid pesticide exposure.

Farm workers are seasonal workers and often also migrants or recent immigrants. You may worry about what may happen if you complain or insist on your legal rights; migrant workers also worry they could be deported if their job ends. You may be afraid to say no to unsafe work if a farmer or farm labour contractor asks you to work with or near pesticides without training or protection. Pesticides may seem less of a problem than getting enough work to qualify for EI or ensuring that you're hired again next season.

It is up to you to do something if you feel unsafe. WorkSafeBC does not have the resources to ensure that all farms are following pesticide rules. It does respond to complaints from workers and others. If no one complains, then unsafe working conditions can continue without anyone—other than the workers—knowing.

Here are some suggestions:

- 1. Talk to your boss.** If you feel comfortable talking about safety with the farmer, or with your labour contractor, you should do so. Ideally, the farmer would be the best person to talk to because he or she has the most control over the use of pesticides; however, both farmers and contractors are responsible for your safety, so talk to the person with whom you have the best working relationship.
- 2. Reach out.** If you don't feel comfortable speaking to your employers directly, you don't need to be alone. Talk to Justicia for Migrant Workers (778-895-5878) and the BC Federation of Labour (604-430-1421). These two organizations help farm workers stand up for their rights on occupational health and safety issues.
- 3. Complain.** If your employer isn't following the rules in this booklet, you can complain to WorkSafeBC (604-276-3053 in the Lower Mainland

or 1-800-335-9330). You don't have to give your name if you don't want to, or you can ask that your name be kept confidential, or have someone else make the complaint for you.

- 4. Options for Migrant Workers.** National governments often help to bring migrant seasonal workers to Canada. And they can help when there is a problem. Mexican workers can complain about safety or other issues to the Mexican Consulate in Vancouver. Workers from other countries can also call their nation's representative in Canada.

Information and Training

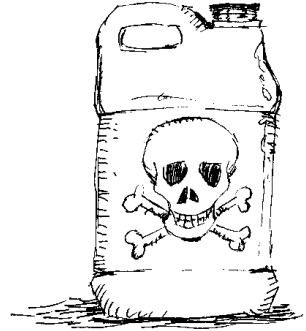
You have a right to know what hazardous substances you may be exposed to. The law says that farmers must provide health and safety training programs, including information and training on pesticides used on the farm. This is the most critical of your rights as a worker – because if you don't know what risks you're being exposed to, how can you protect yourself?

For small farms employing less than 20 farm workers, this can be as simple as holding regular monthly meetings with workers to discuss health and safety matters. Farmers or farm labour contractors who employ more than 20 farm workers (even if the workers are actually located on more than one farm) will usually need to have a more formal occupational health and safety program in place.



As part of your right to safety training and information, workers are entitled to:

- Know what pesticides are used on the farm and what risks they pose. This includes access to “material safety data sheets” or other documents telling you about pesticide risks;



- Be trained to address the risks of exposure from pesticides during their handling, storing, mixing or application; and
- Be trained in emergency procedures for dealing with a spill or getting medical help.

These types of information and training requirements are important for you to protect yourself and other workers.

General Protection

In B.C., a worker can refuse work if he or she has reasonable grounds to believe that the work poses an undue hazard to any person's health and safety. In other words, *if you think the work is dangerous, you can say no.*

Some pesticides contain dangerous substances that are:

- known or suspected to cause cancer,
- known to affect human reproductive systems,
- known to sensitize workers so that they are more likely to suffer poisoning from repeat exposure.

In these cases, farmers are required, by law, to try to find a substitute for the pesticide. If the material data safety sheet indicates that a pesticide poses one of these risks, you may choose to talk to the farmer about finding other, safer choices.

If there is no practical substitute for such a pesticide, the farmer must develop an "exposure control plan" that will keep the levels of exposure to a legally acceptable level.

Finally, farmers are required to store pesticides in designated storage areas away from work and eating areas, and to keep them clearly labeled. When not being used, the containers should have labels clearly identifying the pesticide and safety precautions to be taken in using it.



Protection for Applicators

Any person who is actually applying pesticides on the farm must be trained in the use of the equipment and pesticide. If a particularly poisonous pesticide is being used, the applicator must be over 16 years of age and be certified by the provincial government as a pesticide applicator.

The farmer must provide pesticide applicators with protective clothing to wear while applying or working with pesticides. For more hazardous pesticides, the farmer must give you a respirator or other safety gear. If you're provided with protective equipment, use it properly and ask if you're not certain how to use it.

If you regularly apply pesticides, ask the Farm And Ranch Safety and Health Association (FARSHA) – at 604-881-6078 or 1-877-533-1789 – for the booklet – *Pesticide Safety for Agricultural Workers*. It explains the equipment and safety procedures that should be used by pesticide applicators.

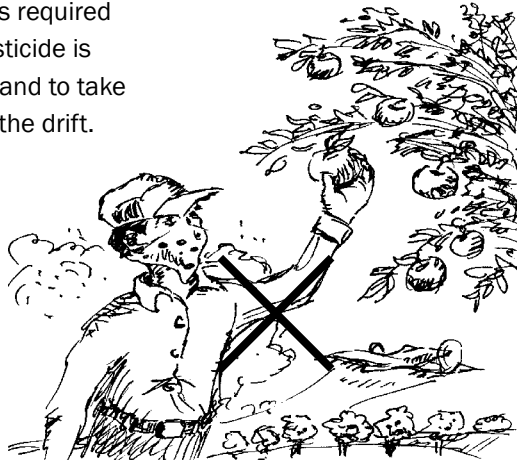
Protection for Pickers

Long pants and shirts are the best protection for pickers and other workers. Gloves are a good idea (neoprene or rubber gloves are best). If you don't have gloves, you should be certain to wash well whenever possible, and especially before eating. Make sure the clothes you wore for picking are washed separately from your regular clothes.

Farmers must not allow workers into a field until 24 hours after a pesticide is applied. For more hazardous pesticides, pickers cannot enter for 48 hours after the pesticide is applied, and the farmer must post a notice about the pesticide used and the no-entry period. For some pesticides, even longer "no-entry" periods may be required (check the pesticide label).

Sometimes pesticides can drift in the air from a nearby field. Some workers try to deal with this mist by putting a scarf or other clothing item across their mouth. This does not provide protection against inhaling pesticides. If pesticides drift onto you, leave the area immediately until the spraying is

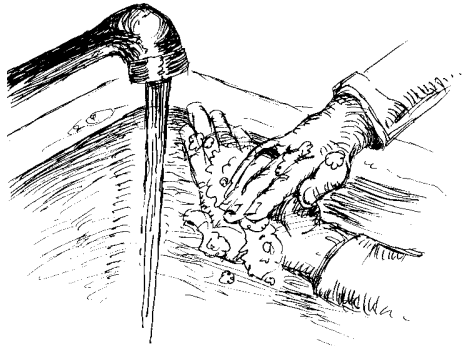
complete. The farmer is required to tell you what the pesticide is and the risks it poses, and to take steps to better control the drift.



Keeping Clean at Work

Washing is an important way to stay safe from pesticides. A farmer who uses pesticides must provide farm workers with facilities for washing up and give them the time to wash. For some farms, it may be just a source of clean water, soap and a basin; but if hazardous pesticides are being used, the farmer must provide safety gear as well as appropriate shower and change facilities. If you have been directly exposed to a pesticide, you shouldn't wait to wash. The law says that workers are required to wash exposed areas immediately.

It is important for your safety to wash your hands thoroughly before each break. Use as much water as you need.

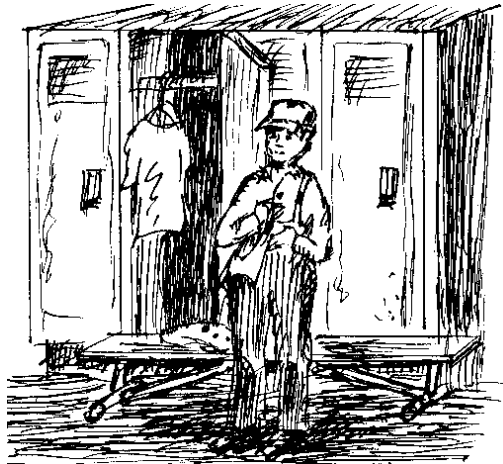


Washing facilities are among the most basic safety requirements, and you should complain if you don't have them. However, if you don't complain, you can bring washing supplies from home. If the farmer provides water, but no soap – bring soap from home. If there is no access to water, you should at least bring and use wet disposable wipes. This is NOT a substitute for the washing facilities required by law – but it is better than nothing and you should wash properly as soon as you are able to.

Going Home

Farmers and farm workers often carry pesticides from work into their homes. Once inside, the pesticides will expose their families too. Here are some basic tips to reduce the risks:

- Wash thoroughly before leaving work.
- Change out of work clothes – ideally before getting home. This avoids bringing pesticides on clothes into the house or spreading them to loved ones.
- Wash the pesticide-contaminated clothes separately from other clothes. This prevents regular clothes from picking up pesticides in the wash.
- Vacuum or mop living spaces regularly – frequent cleaning will reduce the amount of pesticide residue in a home.



What to do About Pesticide Poisoning?

If someone is suffering serious health problems after exposure to pesticides:

- Call the BC poison control centre right away at 604-682-5050 in the Lower Mainland or 1-800-567-8911 in the rest of B.C.
- Use a cell phone to phone right from the field. If no one speaks English, you can phone 9-1-1 and ask for translation.
- For more information on treating pesticide exposure and getting medical help and maintaining a record of symptoms, read *Pesticides and Your Health*.

If you get sick from pesticides and cannot work, you can apply to WorkSafeBC for compensation for your injuries and for lost income. This costs the farmer or farm labour contractor nothing; they are already paying worker's insurance to WorkSafeBC (although they might be asked some questions about how the pesticide exposure happened).

Sometimes workers develop more serious illnesses (such as cancer or reproductive problems) after they have stopped working with pesticides. They can still make a claim for compensation but it may be difficult to prove that the illness was caused by pesticides that he or she was exposed to while working. However, workers who have been unable to work because of long or serious illnesses after exposure to pesticides should consider making a claim.

For More Information

The information in this booklet is based on information from the *BC Workers' Compensation Act*, the Occupational Health and Safety Regulations and other sources. An annotated version, with the original sources noted, is available from the West Coast Environmental Law website at <http://wcel.org/pesticides>.

This booklet provides information about the current state of the law as of September 2008. It is not legal advice, and if you have a particular legal problem, please contact a lawyer.



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