EPA Seeks Tougher Safety Standards For Farmworkers

Dina Cappiello, Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) -- The Environmental Protection Agency on Thursday proposed strengthening 20-year-old standards aimed at protecting farmworkers from toxic pesticides.

"The current rule is not working the way it should," said Jim Jones, head of the agency's Office of Chemical Safety and Pollution Prevention.

The changes would bar almost anyone 16 and younger from handling the most toxic pesticides and require no-entry zones around fields to protect workers from drift and fumes. Farms would also have to post no-entry signs to prohibit workers from entering fields until pesticide residues declined to safe levels.

Farms would also have to provide annual training sessions on pesticide risk to workers, including how to protect their families when they return home with clothes and shoes potentially laced with pesticides. Now, farmworkers receive training once every five years.

Farms staffed with family members would continue to be exempt.

The EPA says that between 1,200 and 1,400 cases of pesticide exposure are reported each year at farms, nurseries and other agricultural operations covered by the current standards. But the EPA says that 20 to 90 percent more cases are not being reported.

Farmworkers are unique in that many of the workplace protection standards issued by the Occupational Safety and Health Administration for other industries do not apply to them. Many farmworkers are migrants who move from farm to farm, making it difficult to track health problems from pesticide exposure that can develop overtime.

"For far too long, this essential labor force has been treated as second class," said Amy Liebman, the director of environmental and occupational health for the Migrant Clinicians Network, an organization that focuses on migrant health care.

Liebman said the group was pleased with EPA's proposal but would like to have seen it include more frequent training, additional protections for workers applying the pesticides, such as medical monitoring, and protections for whistleblowers who file complaints.

The American Farm Bureau said it has not had time to review the proposal.

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