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America's farm workers still toil in fields of danger

By E.G. VALLIANATOS

The tale is familiar by now, but that makes it no less horrifying: migrant men and women (most of them from Mexico and Central America), along with some poor blacks and whites from the United States, following the growing and harvest seasons, working hard for pitiful wages while enduring dangerous lives.

In 1979, I was a new Environmental Protection Agency employee attending a government-funded seminar about the plight of farm workers. Expert after expert described conditions of horror. The threat came from farm sprays -- the farm workers' worst enemy. Many farm workers didn't understand the instructions on the pesticide can or the advice of the farmers on when to enter sprayed fields. Sometimes workers were sprayed while harvesting crops, but most often the workers harvested crops with the toxin still on the leaves and fruit.

More than 25 years later, little has changed.

EPA regulations address wearing proper clothing and masks to avoid contact with the toxins, some of which are nerve poisons. But how would one be able to wear protective clothing and masks in high temperatures? Also, many workers carry their children in the fields, leaving them to drink contaminated water and play in ditches drenched with sprays.

I wrote more than one memo to senior EPA managers explaining that the toxic exposure of farm workers during harvest put the EPA in an awful predicament. The agency had the responsibility to side with workers, forbidding the use of the known toxins. But the managers never responded to my reports -- and with good reason. They knew things I did not. They knew that the EPA was sinking into a moral abyss.

Scientists at Colorado State University, funded by the EPA, confirmed in the late 1970s what knowledgeable scientists suspected all along: Nerve-poison pesticides known as organophosphates were affecting the central nervous systems of humans. These products of World War II chemical warfare research, very popular with farmers, were causing immediate and long-term crippling effects on those coming in contact with them. Even one serious exposure could cause lasting brain and nerve damage.

In 1981, Clarence B. Owens, an agronomy professor at Florida A&M University, reported to the EPA and the National Science Foundation, which had funded his research on the effects of pesticides on migrant farm workers, that the workers were risking their lives.

"Migrant workers are young workers," he said, "but their health statistics resemble those of middle-age Americans. Some 56 percent of the workers had abnormal kidney and liver functions; 78 percent had severe chronic skin rash; and 54 percent, abnormalities in chest cavities."

By 1980, EPA managers had to do something about the effects of the nerve poisons, documented by the Colorado study and, indirectly, by the Owens study. They knew that farm workers were in continual contact with those killer sprays. But because they dared not ban the warfare chemicals from agriculture, they set up a fake "farm worker protection program" to take the steam off the pressure cooker. The EPA rejected the damning findings of Owens without any follow-up on the deleterious effects of sprays on the migrants.

Unfortunately, farm workers continue to face physical harassment and violence. Their wages have not changed much from the 1970s. With rare exception, they make no money for overtime and have no right to organize. In Florida, the Coalition of Immokalee Workers boycotted Taco Bell for four years before they were granted, in 2005, a penny more per pound for the tomatoes they harvest.

Farm workers, of course, deserve protection from nerve poisons. But they are far from the only victims in this tale.

Neurotoxins on the farm or in the home are wounding all living things. A 2006 study by Columbia University scientists made the connection between one of those neurotoxins, chlorpyrifos and learning disorders in children living in New York.

EPA banned chlorpyrifos from home use in 2001, but not from farms. What about the children in rural America?

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