Weak Label Requirements and Inadequate Protection Put Workers’ Health and Safety at Risk

Researchers and farmworker advocates alike have identified barriers to access and proper use of appropriate personal protective equipment (PPE) for farmworkers who mix, load and apply pesticides. However, even when the PPE requirements on a pesticide label are strictly followed, situations frequently arise where required PPE is inadequate and workers are left unprotected against obvious exposures.

Consider the following examples from research, investigations and the California Department of Pesticide Regulation Pesticide Illness Query (CaPIQ) database that demonstrate some of the deficiencies in labeling regarding PPE.

**Tree branches, vines, uneven ground dislodged PPE or damaged sprayers**

As an applicator spraying a vineyard with an airblast sprayer, his leg was accidentally hit by one of the vines, causing his head to hit the ground and nearly dislodging his protective equipment. He had to be taken to the hospital for treatment.

**Backpack and other handheld sprayer malfunction**

As an applicator applying pesticide to a vineyard, his backpack sprayer malfunctioned, causing the nozzle to detach and spray him in the face, resulting in severe burns and disorientation.

**PPE failed to protect applicators doing air-blast applications in open tractor cabs**

As an applicator was working inside a tractor cab, he inhaled a high concentration of pesticide and suffered from severe respiratory distress. He had to be airlifted to a hospital for critical care.

**Protective footwear isn’t required on many pesticide labels for mixing and loading or application activities even though contaminated shoes are a documented source of take home exposure and even pesticide poisoning.**

In 2007, California officials investigated the poisoning of a pesticide applicator with symptoms of headache, nausea and stomach discomfort following the ingestion of contaminated shoes. The applicator discovered that the shoes had been exposed to a high concentration of the pesticide during the application.

**Face shield, safety glasses or goggles failed to protect**

As an applicator was using a small spray backpack with an airblast sprayer, he accidentally sprayed himself in the face, resulting in severe eye irritation and chemical burns. He had to be treated at the hospital for extensive medical care.

**Recommendations for reducing exposure during pesticide handling activities**

1. Use less toxic pesticides and alternative controls to reduce dependence on personal protective equipment because PPE is uncomfortable, cumbersome and increases risk of heat illness.
2. Use enclosed caps with filtration systems or enclosed hoods and respiratory protection for air-blast applications to adequately prevent eye, skin and respiratory exposure, especially when applying higher toxicity pesticides.
3. Prohibit use of hand-held wands and backpack sprayers for application of higher toxicity pesticides.
4. To reduce applicator exposure and offsite contamination, pesticide spray practices should be built into spraying and maintenance schedules.
5. Shutting off spray before unplugging nozzles or turning equipment around must be standard practice.
6. Daily equipment inspection and ongoing maintenance is essential for preventing worker exposure from leaking equipment.
7. Provide protective footwear for all types of pesticide mixing and loading and application, especially when applicators are using hand-held application equipment.
8. Provide adequate change areas, storage areas for street clothes, washing facilities and showers.
9. Ensure provision of durable protective equipment that fits well and doesn’t tear easily.

**Virginia Ruiz, Farmworker Justice**

**Anne Katten, California Rural Legal Assistance Foundation**

**Jeanie Economos, Farmworker Association of Florida**