

A FIELD SURVEY OF PESTICIDE-RELATED WORKING CONDITIONS IN THE U.S. AND CANADA

**MONITORING THE INTERNATIONAL CODE OF CONDUCT ON THE
DISTRIBUTION AND USE OF PESTICIDES IN NORTH AMERICA**

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This report presents the findings of a field survey of pesticide-related working conditions in four agricultural areas of North America conducted by the Pesticide Education and Action Project, which is the North American Regional Center for the Pesticide Action Network (PAN). The survey was undertaken during 1987 in conjunction with other Pesticide Action Network International efforts related to monitoring the implementation of the FAO International Code of Conduct on the Distribution and Use of Pesticides. Both the survey and report were made possible with the financial assistance of the George Gund Foundation of Cleveland, Ohio.

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FOREWORD

"The [FAO Pesticide] Code is designed to be used, within the context of national law, as a basis whereby government authorities, pesticide manufacturers, those engaged in trade and any citizens concerned may judge whether their proposed actions and the actions of others constitute acceptable practices."

— Article 1.6, *FAO International Code of Conduct on the Distribution and Use of Pesticides*

In 1985, the United Nations Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO) responded to increasing reports of pesticide-related problems throughout the world with a unique document. The FAO's International Code of Conduct on the Distribution and Use of Pesticides established for the first time a set of minimum international standards for measuring the pesticide-related policies and practices of both governments and industry.

Recognizing the wide concern and impacts of these powerful chemicals, the FAO addressed its Code to a broad audience, including governments of pesticide exporting and importing countries; pesticide manufacturers, trade associations, formulators and distributors; users; and citizens' organizations, including environmental groups, consumer groups, and trade unions.

The special role of the FAO Pesticide Code in countries with few or no pesticide regulatory systems is emphasized throughout its text and in most writings about it. While this focus indicates appropriate concern about the damage caused by pesticides in such countries, it also reflects unspoken assumptions that the relatively strong environmental and occupational regulations in industrialized countries preclude serious pesticide-related problems within their own borders.

A recent survey of pesticide-related working conditions in four diverse agricultural areas in the U.S. and Canada demonstrates that such assumptions are false. Over two years after its adoption, many provisions of the Pesticide Code are routinely violated in the very region of the world often held up as a model to developing countries striving to bring their pesticide problems under control.

This report describes day-to-day pesticide-related practices as reported by 105 agricultural workers in British Columbia, California, Louisiana, and Ohio. The report is intended to include the experiences of U.S. and Canadian farm workers – the North Americans most directly affected by pesticide practices (acceptable and otherwise) – in the FAO Code monitoring and evaluation process.

As this study indicates, conditions facing agricultural workers in North America, and particularly migrant workers, are more similar to those in developing countries than is commonly supposed. High illiteracy rates, lack of protective equipment and training, ignorance

among both workers and doctors, lack of safety precautions and a fundamental lack of access to usable information appears to characterize working conditions in each of the four areas surveyed for this monitoring report.

- Of the 105 fieldworkers interviewed, 45 (43%) reported they had been poisoned by pesticides, 26 (24%) more than once. Only half of those poisoned received medical help.
- Two-thirds of the fieldworkers said they had no source of information about pesticides.
- Forty-one percent of the pesticide mixer/loader/applicators (MLAs) said they did not read the labels on pesticides containers. Since 41% of the MLAs had received six or less years of schooling, and 14% had received none at all, reading labels for necessary health and safety information was not an option for many.
- Showers at work, recommended by physicians and industry alike for decontamination after exposure to pesticides, were not available for over 80% of the MLAs.
- Reuse of pesticide containers was widely reported. Purposes of reuse included carrying and storing water, harvesting and transporting crops, and even storing children's toys. Unsafe and environmentally hazardous pesticide container disposal practices were also reported, often as a result of direct instructions by crew supervisors.

While not all of the survey findings relate directly to the provisions of the FAO Code, together they indicate that even where regulations are strong on paper, as in Canada and the U.S., serious pesticide-related problems exist. Furthermore, the findings demonstrate that many of the basic problems underlying patterns of pesticide poisoning in the Third World are also present in North America.

This survey and report show that agricultural pesticide practices in North America do not meet the minimal standards of the International Pesticide Code. The findings also describe a shameful legacy of poor treatment and inadequate protection of the workers upon whom North Americans depend for their sustenance.

Monica Moore, Director
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