

EPA chief, farmworkers praise new pesticide rules

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The chief of the Environmental Protection Agency visited a Stockton-area farm Tuesday to celebrate new federal rules for protecting workers from pesticides.

Administrator Gina McCarthy, joined by United Farm Workers President Arturo Rodriguez, said the changes could reduce the 3,000-plus cases of pesticide exposure each year.

The rules, enacted last month, are similar to what California already required. They include increased training of applicators and other workers and a ban on pesticide handling by any employee under 18.

“It’s a great day for farm workers, not only here in the state of California but throughout the United States,” Rodriguez said of the rules, which apply to about 2 million people working at farms, nurseries, greenhouses and forests.

They spoke to the media after touring Pacific Triple E Farm, which grows tomatoes, walnuts, almonds and cherries about two miles southeast of Stockton. Its workers are part of the UFW, which is much reduced in membership from its heyday decades ago but played a key role in the new rules.

Juana Sánchez, a Spanish-speaking employee, said through an interpreter that she welcomes the training on how to avoid tracking pesticides off farms.

“I think these new changes are important, especially for the workers who arrive home covered with residues and we have to tell our kids to not come near us because we don’t want to transmit the residues to them,” she said.

Mike Carr, a farm manager for Pacific Triple E, said the federal policy largely mirrors what already was required by the state for the workforce, which peaks at about 400 people each year.

“We’ve already implemented them,” he said. “We’ve had annual training for our employees for the last 10 years.”

This is the first time that the EPA has banned pesticide handling by hired workers under 18, but it exempted farmers’ family members from this and most other rules.

The new rules, the first revision since 1992, also include:

- Annual training, rather than every five years, on pesticide safety.
- Longer and more visible posting of notices about where the chemicals are applied.
- Documentation that applicators have been properly fitted for respirator masks and are medically cleared for this work.
- Specific amounts of water to keep on hand for routine washing and emergency decontamination.
- Increased protection from retaliation against workers who report violations.

“These are things that other hazardous employers have been required to do,” McCarthy said, “and we’re bringing it to the agricultural community.”

The EPA will carry out the rules with the help of state agencies, including the California Department of Pesticide Regulation. Director Brian Leahy, who took part in the tour, said his agency in turn relies on county agricultural

commissioners to assure safe use.

“We have more people in the field, just doing enforcement, outreach and education on pesticides,” he said.

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