

Calif. bill would expand pesticide safety program

April 2 2010, By ROBIN HINDERY , Associated Press Writer



In this Sept. 25, 2001 file photo, Crop dusting planes dust cotton crops in Lemoore, Calif. California's nationally renowned pesticide safety program may soon be expanded to offer increased protection to the state's 700,000 farm workers. A bill moving through the state Assembly would require laboratories that test for pesticide poisoning to report their data directly to the California Department of Pesticide Regulation. Currently, labs must report test results back to the patient's physician, but not to any state agency. (AP Photo/Gary Kazanjian)

(AP) -- Josefina Miranda doesn't need scientific studies to tell her about the dangers of pesticide exposure. She knows them all too well.

On a Thursday morning in 1995, the four-months pregnant farmworker spent several hours working in a field in the small Central Valley town of Earlimart - a site she remembers as being so soaked with pesticides "it was like it had been raining."

Two days later, she had a miscarriage.

Miranda, now 38 and still working the fields, said the doctor at the hospital told her the pesticides were not to blame for her miscarriage because she didn't ingest any chemicals. But she believes otherwise. Other farmworkers from the same field also fell ill, she said, but they were too afraid to report their symptoms or seek medical attention.

Miranda and the rest of California's 700,000 farmworkers may soon receive greater protection under a proposed expansion of the state's nationally renowned pesticide safety program.

A bill moving through the state Assembly would require laboratories that test for pesticide poisoning to report their data to the California Department of Pesticide Regulation. Currently, labs only report test results to patients' physicians, not to any state agency.

The bill would allow health officials in the nation's largest agricultural state to more accurately track pesticide exposure and implement safety precautions, said Assemblyman Pedro Nava, D-Santa Barbara, who wrote the bill.

"California would be the first state to collect this data on such a large scale, coordinating multiple labs," said Margaret Reeves, senior scientist at the Pesticide Action Network North America, which is a sponsor of Nava's bill. "California should be a model in setting the path for national monitoring of pesticide illness."

California generates more than 11 percent of U.S. agricultural sales. In 2008, its farmworkers handled about 5 million pounds of pesticides containing organophosphates and carbamates - chemicals that can cause infertility, nerve damage and other serious health effects, according to the Department of Pesticide Regulation.

Pesticides used for agricultural purposes accounted for 22 percent of the nearly 1,500 cases of suspected pesticide exposure in California in 2007, the most recent year the department has analyzed. The largest share of reported cases - 45 percent - occurred in non-agricultural circumstances, such as home gardening and the shipment or manufacturing of pesticides.

Under a state law in place since the early 1970s, employers must track the number of hours workers spend handling organophosphate or carbamate pesticides. Workers who do so regularly must undergo periodic blood tests to check for possible pesticide poisoning.

Nine labs throughout the state have approval to perform this test, which checks for a decrease in cholinesterase, or ChE, an enzyme essential to nervous system function. Pesticide exposure can lead to a drop in ChE, as can chronic malnutrition, liver damage and various other conditions.

Employers and physicians must report abnormal test results or suspected pesticide illnesses to their county's health department within 24 hours. The department then alerts the county agricultural commissioner and sends a pesticide illness report to the Department of Pesticide Regulation.

State officials acknowledge the current system isn't perfect. A Department of Pesticide Regulation fact sheet notes that: "Physicians often do not report potential pesticide illnesses."

Nava said his bill would help bridge the gap by requiring labs to report to the state and combining individual lab results in a statewide electronic database. Patterns would be easier to detect, he said, and officials could intervene quickly at sites with particularly high levels of pesticide exposure.

"The way things are structured now, the full information is not available to public agencies that have a specific responsibility to follow up on farmworker health," Nava said. "This makes no sense from a public safety standpoint."

Nava modeled his proposal, in part, on the pesticide safety program in Washington state, which has been compiling ChE test results for several years.

The Department of Pesticide Regulation has not taken an official position on the legislation, which is awaiting a hearing in the Assembly Environmental Safety and Toxic Materials Committee.

Department spokeswoman Lea Brooks said the bill's reporting requirements would be difficult to implement because labs are not told whether a ChE test is linked to potential [pesticide exposure](#) or some other health concern. However, she said she wasn't aware of a reason why doctors couldn't provide that information in the future.

Nava's bill could generate some useful data, but it's largely unnecessary, Brooks added.

"DPR staff is confident that existing mechanisms are sufficient to detect serious acute pesticide effects," she said in an e-mail to The Associated Press.

Erik Nicholson, national vice president of the United Farm Workers, said improved tracking of ChE test results would allow California to focus its safety efforts on the highest-risk individuals.

"We're talking about classes of pesticides that are based on nerve-gas technology and can have a very significant impact on human health," he said.

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