

## NEWS RELEASE

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### **Pesticide Safety Laws Fail to Protect Farmworkers**

#### **State Agency Confirms Widespread Under-Enforcement, Many Poisonings Result from By-the-Book Use**

CALIFORNIA—A new report entitled *Fields of Poison 2002* released today by United Farm Workers (UFW), Pesticide Action Network North America (PANNA) and California Legal Rural Assistance Foundation (CRLAF) reveals that weak enforcement of pesticide-related worker health and safety laws remains a serious problem in California. Recent evaluations by the state's pesticide regulatory agency confirmed widespread violations of pesticide work safety regulations; *Fields of Poison 2002* further shows that pesticide safety laws fail to protect many of the state's 700,000 farmworkers from poisonings even when the laws are apparently followed.

Between 1997 and 2001, California Department of Pesticide Regulation (DPR) staff observed hundreds of pesticide operations in 20 counties across the state and found that worker health and safety requirements were violated in over 30% of the inspections. In addition, while DPR data confirm that safety laws were violated in at least 41% of reported poisonings between 1997 and 2000, *Fields of Poison 2002* reveals that enforcement actions such as warning letters, notices or fines were rarely issued. In fiscal year 2000/2001, counties issued fines in fewer than 20% of confirmed violation cases, the vast majority for less than \$400.

*Fields of Poison 2002* further shows that pesticide safety laws often fail to protect farmworkers even when apparently followed. In at least 38% of confirmed poisoning cases, no pesticide safety violations were found.

"California's pesticide safety laws are simply not strict enough to protect the state's farmworkers who get poisoned even when the laws are followed," said Margaret Reeves, Staff Scientist at PANNA. "We are clearly failing the people who work hard to put food on our tables."

More than 75% of reported poisonings occur either when farmworkers are exposed to pesticides that drift away from where they are applied, or when workers are exposed to pesticide residues, often upon re-entering treated fields. Fourteen of the top 20 pesticides responsible for reported illnesses are among the most hazardous used in California.

*Fields of Poison 2002* documents an annual average of 475 reported farmworker poisoning cases between 1997 and 2000. Although this is a decrease from the 1991-1996 annual

average of 665, the report highlights concerns that underreporting of poisonings is likely to have increased in recent years due to rising health care costs, demographic changes in the farmworker population and serious flaws in poisoning incident investigations.

The greatest number of worker poisonings were reported in Tulare, Fresno, Monterey and Kern counties. The report documents that the greatest number of reported farmworker poisonings between 1997 and 2000 were linked to pesticide use on grapes, soil, oranges and cotton.

<b>Crop/Application Site</b>	<b>Reported Poisoning Cases 1997–2000</b>
Grapes	331
Soil <sup>a</sup>	222
Oranges	124
Cotton	116
Packing/processing <sup>b</sup>	99
Almonds	98

a. Soil is treated with fumigant pesticides before planting occurs. The crops most treated with fumigants are strawberries, carrots, tomatoes and potatoes.

b. Disinfectants and insecticides account for most reported poisonings during packing and processing.

“Farmworkers are still more at risk of pesticide poisoning than any other sector of society. Lawmakers have told DPR it must prevent low income communities from bearing the brunt of health risks from pesticides, but the agency is dragging its heels,” Anne Katten, Pesticide and Work Safety Project Director of CRLAF stated. “The time is long overdue for DPR to move from counting poisonings and violations to making the fields safe for workers.”

UFW, PANNA and CRLAF are members of the Californians for Pesticide Reform (CPR) coalition. Together, these groups demand that DPR and county enforcement officials take the following immediate actions to protect the health and safety of California’s farmworkers:

- Eliminate use of the most hazardous pesticides and drift-prone application methods to reduce immediate and chronic pesticide poisonings at their source;
- Improve regulations to reduce pesticide drift and pesticide residue exposure by requiring buffer zones during pesticide applications, improved posting and notification, and requiring longer waiting periods before workers reenter fields;
- Strengthen enforcement of existing laws and regulations by significantly raising and routinely issuing fines for violations;
- Improve farmworkers’ access to pesticide information and healthcare.

*Fields of Poison 2002* was released today by the Californians for Pesticide Reform coalition in news conferences throughout the state. The report updates the coalition’s 1999 report *Fields of Poison* that analyzed reported California farmworker pesticide poisonings from 1991-1996.

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*The report is available in English and Spanish. To order a copy of Fields of Poison 2002, call CPR at 1-888-CPR-4880 or visit [www.panna.org](http://www.panna.org) or [www.pesticidereform.org](http://www.pesticidereform.org).*