

Bilingual pesticide labels: It's about time!

Jun 9, 2011 by Margaret Reeves



Nearly 2 million U.S. farmworkers make up the [backbone of our agricultural economy](#), performing some of the most demanding manual labor in any economic sector. Farmworkers are also some of the least protected, experiencing a [rate of pesticide poisoning](#) 39 times higher than that found in all other industries combined.

This month Pesticide Action Network joins other farmworker advocates in urging EPA to reduce these over-the-top rates of pesticide-related illness by ensuring that farmworkers have access to basic safety information — [in a language they can read](#).

More than a year ago, we submitted a joint petition calling on EPA to require pesticide manufacturers to provide Spanish language labels on their products; EPA has finally responded, and will take public comments until June 28.

Spanish language labels

Pesticide labels communicate critical information about the health hazards of pesticides, directions for safer use, and first aid actions to take if someone is accidentally exposed.

Most U.S. farmworkers are [foreign born and Spanish speaking](#), and many cannot read English.

Current EPA regulations recognize the prevalence of Spanish speakers in the workforce, but do little about it. Instead, they put the burden on workers and employers to provide their own translations. On labels of the two most toxic categories of pesticides, the following appears: “Si Usted no entiende la etiqueta, busque a alguien para que se la explique a Usted en detalle. [If you do not understand the label, find someone to explain it to you in detail.]” ([EPA regulations: 40 CFR 156.206\(e\)](#)).

In short, the current labeling requirements don't do nearly enough to protect Spanish-speaking farmworkers.

In a Washington State study of pesticide handlers, only 29% reported being able to read in English but [nearly all were able to read in Spanish](#) to at least some degree. It's one more reason that the incidence of pesticide exposure among farmworkers is so high.

While Spanish-language labels will not eliminate the problem of pesticide exposure among farmworkers, it will certainly help reduce the frequency and extent of accidental health damages.

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Published on Pesticide Action Network (<http://www.panna.org>)

Bilingual labels already exist

It obviously can be done. Pesticide manufacturers already translate many of their labels into Spanish and other languages in order to sell them internationally. In Puerto Rico, Restricted Use Pesticides carry Spanish labels; and for nearly a decade [Canada has required bilingual labeling](#) in French and English.

[Please join us in urging EPA](#) to require that pesticide manufacturers provide Spanish-language labels. It just makes sense.

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