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California farmworkers face dual threats from extreme heat, pesticide exposure | Opinion

By Carly Hyland and Grace Kistner Special to The Sacramento Bee

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Every summer, as temperatures climb across California, thousands of farmworkers endure grueling conditions to produce the food that feeds our state and nation. These essential workers face not only extreme heat, but also daily exposure to pesticides — an invisible but equally dangerous threat. Alarming, current regulations do not adequately account for the compounding effects of pesticide exposure and extreme heat.

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It is estimated that farmworkers have 35 times the risk of dying from extreme heat

Further, many California farmworkers lack access to health services to address these concerns — barriers that will only continue to worsen as the state [limits Medi-Cal access for undocumented individuals](#) and the federal administration's anti-

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California has long been a leader in protecting worker health and safety, yet current guidelines for pesticide regulations assume ideal conditions that do not reflect the reality of farm work in our changing climate. The safety protocols for pesticide exposure were developed without considering how heat may increase pesticide absorption and toxicity, or how workers may avoid wearing protective gear because it makes the heat even more unbearable.

The result is an increased risk of heat exhaustion, respiratory illnesses, neurological issues, complications for pregnant workers and other long-term chronic conditions.

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This reality is underscored by firsthand testimony directly from farmworkers who have shared concerns that they will be “poisoned from pesticides” and feel “suffocated” if they wear extra layers of protective equipment in the California’s triple-digit summer heat.

One farmworker, who continued to work at 37 weeks pregnant, shared that she has “had a headache and wanted to vomit because of the heat... you feel the pressure and your head hurts, and it makes you feel dizzy.”

Now, the California state legislature is finally beginning to recognize long-standing threats to farmworker health and well-being, with recently introduced bills focused on ensuring affordable, safe and healthy housing; fair payment; improved quality; and due process for farmworker labor complaints.

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These efforts are a step in the right direction, but they must be paired with stronger action from the California Environmental Protection Agency to close the gaps in pesticide risk assessments and workplace protections.

A recent study by UC Merced highlighted that [just over half of pesticide applicators have received mandated pesticide safety training](#) in a format they understand. Other reports show that [the number of heat-related deaths may be severely undercounted in California](#), that there are gaps in compliance and enforcement of heat safety rules intended to protect farmworkers and that penalties for employers who violate heat safety regulations are inadequate.

But so far, no regulatory agencies are looking at the combined impacts of heat and pesticides.

We urge CalEPA and the California Division of Occupational Safety and Health to improve inter-agency collaboration to study and address the real-world impacts of pesticide exposure under extreme heat. These agencies should revise the current pesticide risk assessment process to incorporate existing and modeled data regarding the impacts of heat on pesticide use, exposure and vulnerability. We also call on legislators to push state agencies to go beyond the bare minimum and set enforceable safety standards that account for the compounding climate-related dangers of farm work.

This is not just a farmworker issue, it's an issue that affects all Californians: When workers fall ill due to unsafe conditions, productivity falls, consumer and health care costs increase and the stability of our agricultural economy is put at risk.

Ensuring a healthy workforce means ensuring a strong economy and a reliable food system for everyone.

Carly Hyland is an assistant professor of cooperative extension in the UC Berkeley School of Public Health, Division of Environmental Health Sciences. [Cristina Kiatman is a board-certified critical care registered nurse with extensive experience and promotion. Erika Alfaro, Mechelle Perrea-Ryan, Heather Whelan fellow health care professionals and researchers working together in San Francisco](#) [Reach the Decisionmakers Fellowship](#), also contributed to



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