

**United States House of Representatives
Select Committee on the Climate Crisis**

**Hearing on February 5, 2020
“Creating a Climate Resilient America:
Overcoming the Health Risks of the Climate Crisis”**

Questions for the Record

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The Honorable Kathy Castor

- 1. In your testimony before the committee you mentioned some of the risks that farmworkers face from the impacts of climate change. What is the age distribution of these farmworkers and how does their age impact the risks that they face?**

Overall, there are approximately 2.4 millionⁱ farm workers across the country, including hundreds of thousands of minors, ranging in number from 300,000ⁱⁱ to 500,000ⁱⁱⁱ. In terms of family structure, the majority of farm workers surveyed (55 percent) reported having minors in their household. In fact, although nationally-based surveys of farm workers^{iv} don't include children under the age of fourteen, in farmworker families, it is common for children to begin work alongside their parents at ages as young as 12.^v

Farmworkers are also relatively young, with two-thirds of the population (67%) under the age of 44:

- 14-19 years old (7%)
- 20-24 years old (11%)
- 25-34 years old (26%)
- 35-44 years old (23%)
- 45-54 years old (19%)
- 55-64 years old (11%)
- 65 years or older (4%)

Outdoor workers, children, adults over the age of 65, and low-income communities are among the most vulnerable to extreme heat.^{vi} For years, farmworker families have been on the frontlines of exposure to extreme heat and pesticides, a reality that we've underscored at the state and national level, and via Congressional testimony before the Energy and Commerce Committee,^{vii} the Education and Labor Committee,^{viii} and most recently, the Select Committee on the Climate Crisis.^{ix}

2. What are some of the challenges that farmworkers and rural communities face in protecting themselves from the impacts of climate change? Are the challenges unique to rural areas?

Roughly half of farmworkers are undocumented, most face language barriers and lack access to health care and employment benefits. On the economic front, farmworkers have a mean and median income that ranges from \$17,500 to \$19,999 for personal income, and from \$20,000 to \$24,999 for family income.^x These factors limit the ability of farmworkers to be adequately informed about occupational and environmental hazards, to speak out in the workplace or have access to timely medical attention when illness or injury strikes. Limited income also affects the affordability of housing and air conditioning that can provide refuge from extreme temperatures.

When it comes to pesticide exposure, every year, over 1.1 billion pesticides are applied in the United States. Climate change is expected to result in increased pesticide use. Farmworker women work while pregnant. Most farmworkers have minors in their households and that there are hundreds of thousands of minors who work in agriculture. When you consider that, there are serious health implications for all farmworkers but in particular, for farmworker children whose bodies and brains are still developing and could face irreparable harm and reduced IQs through prenatal, on the job, and take-home exposures to neurotoxic organophosphate pesticides.^{xi} Salinas, CA is one of the leading agricultural regions in the country and UC Berkeley's Center for the Health Assessment of Mothers and Children of Salinas (CHAMACOS) Study has been instrumental in shedding light on pesticide exposures among farmworker children.^{xii}

Indeed, some of these challenges are unique to rural and agricultural areas. Compared to urban areas, rural areas have higher concentrations of people that live in poverty and are more likely to have limited access to medical services and housing with air conditioning. And compared to urban areas, agricultural areas face greater exposure to pesticides.

As such, we urge members of Congress to consider the unique vulnerability of the agricultural workforce (both young and old) to climate change, the additional occupational and environmental hazards that farmworkers will face from the combined threat of rising temperatures and increased exposure to pesticides, and the national safeguards that will be needed to protect the people that feed us. In part, this will mean a national heat illness and fatality prevention standard, additional resources to rural and agricultural communities, as well as cancelling the registrations of toxic pesticides and a shift to alternatives that don't threaten the health and development of children in agricultural communities, and across the country.

3. During your testimony you mentioned that farmworkers are on the frontlines of rising heat, wildfires and pesticide exposure. How does air pollution impact farmworker families and rural communities?

In addition to rising heat, wildfires and pesticide exposure, farmworkers are also on the frontlines of exposure to unhealthy air. The UFW Foundation and the United Farm Workers union serve communities located in the leading agricultural regions in the country and in states that are home to the largest number of farmworkers in the country, including California, Washington, Oregon

and Arizona. Based on the 2017 Census of Agriculture, when it comes to farmworkers California (377,593), Washington (228,588), Oregon (86,240), and Arizona (24,648) rank first, second, fourth and thirty-first in the nation, respectively.^{xiii}

In addition to being home to largest number of farmworkers, all of these states are also home to some of the most polluted cities in the nation for ground-level ozone (“smog”), year round particle pollution, and short-term particle pollution, according to the American Lung Association.^{xiv}

Constant exposure to air pollution threatens the health, life expectancy and quality of life farmworker families and rural communities. While ozone pollution harms the lungs, particle pollution increases the risk of lung cancer, shortened life-expectancy, respiratory and cardiovascular problems.^{xv} When it comes to air pollution, the subpopulations that face a greater risk are both children and the elderly, as well those that are low-income and/or suffer from asthma, lung disease, cardiovascular disease or diabetes.^{xvi} We recognize that rising temperatures and extreme heat, facilitate the creation of ground-level ozone and the risk that air pollution causes to human health.

Furthermore, droughts facilitate the environment that is conducive to Valley Fever, a potentially deadly infection caused by a soil-borne fungus that thrives in dry soil. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention shares that tens of thousands of cases of Valley Fever are likely to occur, many will go misdiagnosed because its symptoms can be confused with the flu and many patients aren’t tested for the disease. The numbers indicate that new cases of this harmful fungal disease are concentrated in the San Joaquin Valley, a leading agricultural region in the country where most of California’s farmworkers are located. Experts warn that climate change will expand the areas in the country that will be affected by Valley Fever.^{xvii}

Consistent exposure to rising temperatures, ground-level ozone, particle pollution, pesticides, and the soil-borne fungus that thrives in droughts underscores the importance of protecting farmworkers and agricultural communities from climate change.

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