

Child workers are getting sick while harvesting tobacco on U.S. farms

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Farmworkers make their way across a field shrouded in fog as they hoe weeds from a burley tobacco crop near Warsaw, Ky., early in the morning in this July 10, 2008, file photo. Photo: AP/Ed Reinke, File

RICHMOND, Va. — You have to be at least 18 to buy cigarettes in the U.S. When it comes to working in tobacco fields, however, age apparently doesn't matter.

According to a report released Wednesday, children as young as 7 are working long hours in tobacco fields. They are toiling under sometimes hazardous and sweltering conditions. The tobacco leaves they harvest are laced with nicotine and pesticides.

The new report, from Human Rights Watch, is based on interviews with more than 140 children. Those children work on farms in North Carolina, Kentucky, Tennessee and Virginia, where a majority of the country's tobacco is grown.

The group acknowledges that most of what it documented is legal under U.S. law. Nonetheless, it is calling on state governments and tobacco companies to do better. It is urging them to take further steps to protect children from the hazardous harvesting.

"So Sick That They Throw Up"

"The U.S. has failed America's families," said report co-author Margaret Wurth. It is "not meaningfully protecting child farmworkers from dangers to their health and safety, including on tobacco farms." Farming "is hard work anyway, but children working on tobacco farms get so sick that they throw up." Child workers "get covered by pesticides and have no real protective gear."

Children interviewed by the group reported vomiting, feeling nauseous and headaches while working on tobacco farms. Their symptoms suggest a type of nicotine poisoning called Green Tobacco Sickness. This occurs when workers absorb nicotine through their skin while handling tobacco plants.

The children also said they worked long hours — often in extreme heat — without overtime pay or sufficient breaks. They said they wore no, or inadequate, protective gear.

U.S. agriculture labor laws allow children to work longer hours at younger ages and in more hazardous conditions than children in any other industry. Children as young as 12 can be hired to work on a farm of any size. And children of any age can work on small farms.

"Not A Place For Children"

In 2011, the Labor Department proposed changes that would have prohibited children under 16 from working on tobacco farms. However, these suggested changes were withdrawn in 2012.

Human Rights Watch has met with many of the world's biggest cigarette makers and tobacco suppliers. The group encouraged companies to adopt or strengthen policies to prevent child labor.

The companies, the group said, are concerned about child labor and have developed standards. These include requiring growers they buy tobacco from to follow child labor laws.

"The conditions are inhumane and they should improve them," said 17-year-old Erick Garcia, of Kinston, N.C. Garcia has been working in tobacco field since he was 11 to help his family earn more money.

Additionally, Garcia said kids should primarily focus on school and shouldn't be in the fields: "That's not a place for children," he said.

Republican Kentucky state Sen. Paul Hornback, who owns a tobacco farm, said that while he follows safety regulations, he doesn't believe further restrictions are needed.

"People get pretty extreme about trying to protect everybody from everything," Hornback said. "It's hard manual labor, but there's nothing wrong with hard manual labor."