

Developing Worker Health Standards in Sustainable Agriculture

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The current form of agricultural production is not sustainable for farm workers. A quick review of the variety of posters at the conference as well as other studies confirm this; exposure to pesticides, low life expectancy, injury and mortality rates, average wages, no benefits, the list goes on and on. Yet with troubling frequency, farm workers are omitted from discussions on sustainable agriculture.

Farm workers have intimate knowledge of agricultural production and can bring this wisdom to bear in discussions of steps that should be implemented to make agriculture sustainable. What our community does not want or need are standards that are imposed by third parties. Too often, although well-intentioned, such standards are imbued with paternalism and racism, as they either ignore, or give no voice to farm workers. Currently in agriculture, we have a variety of well-intentioned laws and regulations that are poorly enforced and provide no real mechanism to address issues in the workplace. In fact, this faulty regulatory framework is one of the reasons agriculture is not sustainable for farm workers.

Our vision of sustainable agriculture includes farm workers being at the table with all other players—growers, packers, retailers, and consumers—as vital and equal participants. We need to ensure that all players, not only one or two sectors, earn a living wage and enjoy medical and retirement benefits. We need to ensure that all workers who are part of agriculture have the ability to work without fear of deportation or harassment from federal agencies, and we need a new legalization program for farm workers. We need to work together as an industry to address workplace injuries and fatalities, pesticide exposure and other workplace hazards, and to better educate the consuming public to put their money where their mouth is to support such collaborative ventures. When we do, we will truly be making agriculture sustainable for all.