Profiles of Poison

Survivors of Pesticide Poisoning Say No to Methyl Iodide

The California Department of Pesticide Regulation (DPR) will shortly decide whether to register for use a new, very dangerous pesticide, methyl iodide. The profiles in this report record the stories of nine individuals from across California who have been poisoned by pesticides in the homes, schools and fields where they live and work. These individuals hope their stories will inspire leaders to protect Californians from the horrific—and inevitable—consequences of allowing highly hazardous chemicals to be used in agriculture. Through this report they unite their voices to strongly urge DPR and the governor not to approve the known carcinogen and highly toxic pesticide methyl iodide for use in fields across California.

From the farmworker rushed to the hospital with severe chemical blistering and in need of respiratory support, to the pregnant mother who lost her baby only two days after being exposed to pesticide dew, these are the stories of people who have lived through the pain and trauma of pesticide poisoning and are speaking out to prevent others from suffering the same fate.

Their stories underline the concerns of scientists who have expressed astonishment that an industrial chemical posing such high risks to human health would even be considered for use in agriculture. Listed as a carcinogen under California’s Proposition 65 statute, methyl iodide affects the nervous system, the lungs, liver and kidneys, and poses particular risks to the elderly and developing brains of children. The U.S. EPA’s own evaluation indicates that methyl iodide causes thyroid toxicity, permanent neurological damage, and fetal deaths in experimental animals. Among scientists’ greatest concerns is the pesticide’s ability to cause spontaneous abortion late in pregnancy.

These individuals’ stories represent what happens too frequently—pesticides escape crop boundaries and infiltrate neighboring communities and fields. Fumigants like methyl iodide are especially prone to drift, a serious concern considering this highly toxic pesticide may be applied at rates of up to 175 pounds per acre near neighborhoods, schools and farmworkers in the fields. Even the best efforts of growers and pesticide applicators cannot prevent much of this drift, resulting in public exposure and contamination of the environment.

The individuals in this report represent the many communities across the state who are demanding that the Department of Pesticide Regulation live up to its mission “to protect human health and the environment by regulating pesticide sales and use.”
In May 2000, my life changed in seconds. As I walked across the driveway at my home in the foothills of Ventura County, I felt a helicopter that had been crop dusting a nearby avocado grove fly over me. I was annoyed that my hair had been blown around, not knowing that something that seemed so common could lead to several near death experiences.

Within 72 hours of being sprayed, all my organs were failing. I was hardly recognizable with the unbelievable swelling. Blood work confirmed that I had experienced a life-threatening chemical exposure.

The next 30–60 days were a nightmare. There were several emergency room visits. My cognitive functions began to deteriorate, along with my eyesight, balance, and a host of other related symptoms. Within 30–45 days I couldn’t write a full sentence, and my speech patterns and ability to communicate were deteriorating rapidly. Sixty days after the accident I finally found a doctor who could properly diagnose and treat my symptoms.

The majority of the damage was to my brain and central nervous system. I had optic nerve damage, affecting my vision, and also damage to my immune system. I was told I am now at high risk to acquire Parkinson’s, Alzheimer’s, multiple sclerosis and other neurological disorders. The first three years after the incident it was assumed that I would never drive again, go back to work or even be able to care for myself, let alone take care of my five-year-old daughter.

During this journey one specialist told me that most people who live through an acute chemical exposure to this extent die within the first five years from complications. There were days and months that I truly thought it would have been easier to die. Every day I am thankful that I lived through this ordeal, thankful that my family was able to take on the financial burden of very costly medical treatments, and thankful that I was able to get the care to recover to the extent I have. I am most thankful that my five year old was not in the driveway with me that fateful day. I have no doubt that she would not have survived.

I truly hope with more awareness of the seriousness of living amongst pesticide applications that there will be greater effort to reward health-protective organic farming and to discourage chemical-intensive agriculture. Adding another dangerous pesticide like methyl iodide to the cocktail of toxins used in our farm country just puts more people at risk to experience what I did. No family should ever have to live the nightmare that we have.
Macario Vargas

Macario Vargas is 59 years old and has spent his entire life working as a farmworker in Imperial County. On March 6, 2009 the organization Comité Cívico del Valle (CCV) was called to assist Mr. Vargas by an employee of Calexico’s Employment Development Department. Mr. Vargas had walked into the EDD building in distress, complaining of extreme pain and numbness. CCV was called to assist Mr. Vargas, because CCV had been working with the farmworker community, providing information to farmworkers on how to report pesticide-related illnesses.

Mr. Vargas was in very bad shape when he came in and was in need of immediate medical attention. An ambulance was called and he was transported to El Centro Regional Hospital.

Mr. Vargas stated that two days before, an aerial pesticide applicator had applied pesticides in a field two fields away from where he had been working. It was a windy day, and the pesticide drifted toward the field in which he and his coworkers were working. He didn’t notice anything was wrong until later that evening when he started to feel stinging, itching and irritation in his upper body.

The next day he noticed small patches of blisters developing and felt more pain but decided to go back to work anyway. While working he noticed that the leaves of the produce he was picking were covered in a white powdery-like substance.

His symptoms worsened, his blisters grew, and he started vomiting and experiencing extreme pain, discomfort, numbness, headaches, blurry vision, and irritated eyes. Mr. Vargas does not have health insurance, and his income is very limited. This was a situation of extreme distress for him. Mr. Vargas agreed to share his story so that authorities can learn from his experience and better protect farmworkers from pesticide poisoning.

Josefina Miranda

I’m a mother, wife and farmworker living in Earlimart, California, with my husband and three children. I work in vineyards picking grapes, tipping grape bunches, and pruning grapevines.

On a Thursday morning in 1995, I entered a field to go to work. It was a couple of years after the birth of my first child and I was pregnant for the second time. The field that morning was dripping with what looked like dew. By break time, all our clothes were saturated with the moisture from the field. We were so wet it was as if it had been raining. I remember wringing the moisture out of my over shirt.

I mentioned to my husband that I was concerned the dampness wasn’t dew but pesticides. He told me it was just dew.

Later in the morning the crew boss came around and told us to move out of the field. It turned out the field had been sprayed the night before. We shouldn’t have been put to work there. At this point, some of the workers were experiencing headaches and dizziness. Other farmworkers from the same field fell ill but were too afraid to report their symptoms or to seek medical attention.

Two days later I had a miscarriage. At the hospital, the doctor told me the pesticides weren’t responsible for the miscarriage because I didn’t ingest any chemicals. But in my heart I believed otherwise.

Now at the age of 38 I still work in the fields. My heart goes out to the other women who miscarry as a result of pesticide exposure. Farmworkers should not have to choose between their jobs and the health of their families.

As a farmworker and mother, I strongly urge the Department of Pesticide Regulation to think of pregnant women and not approve the use of another miscarriage-inducing pesticide.
My name is Teresa DeAnda. I live in Earlimart, a town of 7,000 residents, most of whom are Mexican and Filipino farmworkers living in poverty. Vineyards and orchards surround our community, and seeing and smelling pesticides is the norm here.

On November 13, 1999, applicators neglected to properly monitor the pesticide they were applying, and it drifted onto the southeastern side of town. The smell was intense and sulfuric. The poison was so strong people’s eyes began burning. Many people were unable to breathe and developed headaches and dizziness; some even began vomiting. Since my family and I live on the street that was most exposed, we were the second home to be told to evacuate. My four young kids, husband, elderly blind uncle, elderly godfather, small dogs, and I all had to leave town. We had to leave my larger dogs behind. This was very scary and very sad, not knowing if simply breathing was dangerous or not.

Residents were rounded up at the Earlimart Middle School for medical treatment. Without any cover or privacy, firemen ordered people to undress and stand in a makeshift decontamination line where firemen hosed them down using cold, hard water from fire trucks. This was around 9:45 p.m., so it was quite cold. Twenty-four people then had to sit naked on cold, wet grass until an ambulance arrived. Women describe the night as if they had been raped. One woman pleaded that she be allowed to remain dressed in front of her young sons who had never seen her without clothes. Afterwards, people were taken to three different hospitals. Children were sent to hospitals different from their mothers, their mothers’ phone numbers written on their stomachs.

At the hospital, people were told the pesticide would not cause them harm. Since that time, the community has learned that this pesticide does, in fact, cause health problems. It has caused severe respiratory and neurological damage to several people here in Earlimart. Folks who had never suffered asthma before have now been diagnosed with it.

When we returned home, the odor was even stronger than when we’d left. After being home a while, my family’s health became severely compromised. My children became more frequently and more seriously ill. Weeks after the incident, they all came down with ear and throat infections and even bronchitis. My seven-year-old daughter had severe headaches. I was nursing at the time, so I worried about the impact of feeding my baby milk that had this pesticide in it. That’s just the tip of the iceberg of the long-term impacts.

The incident completely changed my life. I am opposed to any applications that can harm the health of those who live close to where pesticides are applied. I understand that this new pesticide methyl iodide is used in laboratories to create cancer. I can’t believe California would consider allowing this chemical to be used on strawberry fields. As a survivor of pesticide poisoning I don’t want to see others suffer the same fate, or worse, due to this new pesticide. Please do not approve methyl iodide.
Maria Alonso

One month ago I began working in an organic strawberry field here in Moorpark in Ventura County. The working conditions are so much better than what I recall from working in non-organic fields four years ago. I no longer have to worry about wiping sweat from my face or getting an eye irritation or hand rash from picking strawberries covered with white powder.

When I worked in non-organic fields, people often picked strawberries on one row while other workers sprayed an adjacent row. Suddenly, workers would start feeling sick and begin complaining of eye irritation or vomiting. During this time, I developed a white rash on my hand, which comes back every year in the summer. My baby son also developed a rash, which his pediatrician later attributed to the pesticides on my clothes transferring to my son while breastfeeding.

The foreman showed concern only for production. Our complaints about the bad odor and symptoms of poisoning were not a priority for him, and our employer would not take responsibility for our resulting medical bills.

I ask that strawberries no longer be sprayed with dangerous pesticides because these pesticides hurt people. In my case, I can't go through the summer without wearing a sweater or else I get a white rash on my hands. Medical bills are expensive, which only adds to the problem. Please take my story into consideration and don't approve another dangerous chemical for use in California's strawberry fields.

Herminia Arenas

I began working in the grape fields 15 years ago but had to quit after 11 years due to my deteriorating health. Many times we were asked to go into the fields to work grapes right after the tractor had just sprayed pesticides. The powder covered us all. While the foreman would cover his face with a bandana, many of us could not stand the bad odor, the nausea, headache, and irritated eyes. By the afternoon, we would feel so sick that we did not eat our lunches or perform our work well.

I recall a time when, after being exposed to pesticides, I developed a white rash, for which I was told by the foreman to go to the doctor. I was led to believe that the expense would be covered because of a deduction in my check. The doctor prescribed a cream, and I was unable to work for three days. Upon returning to work, I was told that I no longer had a job in that field. About eighteen people, including me, were stuck with expensive medical bills. After further exposure to pesticides, over time I developed a red rash, which eventually dried up with the prescribed cream and fell off of my skin, leaving behind black spots that still persist.

During another incident, I was among a group of farmworkers who had been exposed to pesticides at work. After notifying the foreman of our symptoms, we were told to drink milk to overcome the effects. By the time we returned to work the next day, we had all developed a white rash and were suffering from headaches, nausea and eye irritation.

Very often foremen are only concerned with making sure that the fruit grows well and are negligent with farmworkers' health. After many years of working in the fields, I finally had to quit my job, because I have developed asthma and now experience lung pain. The chemicals have affected me. I know of people who are so sick that they decide to go back to their home countries just to die. A lot of people have suffered due to pesticide exposure. Please don't approve methyl iodide for use in California and contaminate our fields and communities even more.
Robert Euresti

My name is Robert Euresti and I am a teacher in the Vineland School District, near Arvin, California, in Kern County.

Two of my colleagues and I were working in my classroom late in the afternoon on a Saturday in October 2003. At one point my instructional aide walked over to me complaining she felt dizzy. I too began to feel dizzy. Suddenly, we both began to tear up and cough incessantly. Half an hour earlier, we had both heard an ambulance go by. We thought there’d been an accident, but it turned out they were evacuating babies, children, and adults from the apartment complex near our school.

They had blocked off the street but my sister was able to drive close enough to pick us up. As she approached the school, she also began coughing and developed a headache. After jumping into her car, we were told to head to Weedpatch Market where we found babies and children crying and gasping for fresh air.

Many people refused medical treatment and transportation, as they did not have insurance to pay for medical services. Altogether we spent three hours at the makeshift site trying to help our students understand what had happened.

It was an awful night. I do not want anyone else to undergo such a horrible experience. I ask that California not approve methyl iodide, yet another dangerous poison.

Domatila Lemus

My name is Domatila Lemus, and I live in Plainview in rural Tulare County. This is where I have live and worked in the fields alongside my husband and raised my children and grandchildren.

All seven of my children have gone to Sunnyside Elementary School, which is surrounded by orange groves. The school would always be calling me to say my children had rashes, or were vomiting, or had headaches. Only a fence separates the school from areas where oranges are being sprayed with pesticides. When I saw children becoming ill after they played near areas being sprayed, I complained, but we never got a response from the Agricultural Commissioner.

In November 2007, I went to the Grandparents Day celebration at Sunnyside School with my two grandchildren, ages 10 and 14. Around 10:30 a.m. all the kids were on the playground having contests for prizes. That’s when I noticed some of the kids looking dizzy and almost falling down. It seemed strange to me since it wasn’t a hot day. Then I noticed a tractor turning at the end of the row close to the children, separated from the playground only by a chain link fence. I could see that he was spraying pesticides. None of the teachers noticed what was going on.

Three little girls seemed particularly sick; they went off to the bathroom. I was very concerned for them, but also relieved that my grandkids didn’t get sick.

We called the County Agriculture Commissioner. When he came to do his investigation he found 11 infractions, including an infraction for not having a permit to spray that type of pesticide.

I want authorities to be conscientious and to be active in protecting our health. For the sake of my grandchildren, I urge those with power not to register this new highly toxic pesticide methyl iodide.
Marilyn Lynds

Every morning I wake up and look out my front door at the field just 25 feet away and wonder, “Will today be the day that they fumigate?”

In 2007, despite objections from my neighbors, the abutting agribusiness injected the toxic trio of chloropicrin, methyl bromide and Telone into the soil. These soil fumigants are remnants of bygone wars and are associated with a myriad of serious adverse health effects, including cancers and neurological disorders.

We were forced to flee our homes, with our neighbors, and spend the night in hotels and at friends’ homes.

We had thought we would be safer when we got home. But because of wind and the fog along the coast, the chemical was transported into our homes. Tests later revealed that the chemical had drifted into our homes and remained there. So we, my family and many others, were forcibly exposed to chemicals linked to cancer.

Despite efforts to pursue litigation, and despite incredible support from California Rural Legal Assistance and other pro-bono attorneys, we’ve struggled to match the power of an industrial grower.

We’ve tried to work with the grower to put the land into an agricultural trust, or even grow other crops more safely, but he has refused to engage with us to find a solution that maintains the agricultural legacy while protecting our health.

I hope that some day there will be protections for communities like mine, so that chemicals like the toxic trio aren’t created in the first place, and that protection zones exist to make sure pesticides never reach my front door step. Registering another dangerous pesticide like methyl iodide is a giant step in the wrong direction.
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Say No to Methyl Iodide

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