



For Immediate Release

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**NC FIELD RESPONSE TO THE 'FARM SAFETY AND HEALTH WEEK' DECLARATION
BY NORTH CAROLINA GOVERNOR PAT MCCRORY**

Agricultural Workers Shouldn't Have to Sacrifice Their Health, Education & Dignity

NC FIELD welcomes the proclamation made by Governor McCrory's office regarding ['Farm Safety and Health Week'](#) from September 15-21, 2013. However, rural residents whose labor is responsible for 77 billion dollars in state revenue, as well as a significant portion of the global food supply, need more than this acknowledgement. If the sentiments of this proclamation are to inspire action, Governor McCrory must alleviate the greatest harms to North Carolina's agricultural workers: poor working conditions and child labor.

Year after year, farmwork is one of the most dangerous occupations in the US, and our state is no exception. Here in North Carolina, it is common for workers to endure unnecessary exposure to pesticides, have no access to fresh water and bathrooms, work long hours doing repetitive movements without proper breaks, and suffer heat stress and musculoskeletal injuries. A 2012 Wake Forest University study revealed that after long days in the field, many farmworkers return to substandard housing that doesn't meet the already low requirements for sanitation and safety.

We see these poor conditions on a regular basis, but we also see farm owners who meet safety standards, pay their workers a fair wage, *and* have a profitable business. The occupational hazards on many farms can be avoided with proper oversight by state agencies and willing compliance by farm owners and labor contractors. Governor McCrory has the power to help make this happen.

Farmworkers do not enjoy the same social safety nets as other workers; if they complain about an injury on the job, or speak up about basic labor violations they often will be harassed, threatened or run-off by their labor contractors. Getting worker's comp is almost impossible for undocumented workers, not because they aren't able to under law, but because they are unaware of their rights, scared to speak up, or coerced into not filing a complaint. Often, when parents suffer an injury and are unable to work, their children are forced into the fields to make up for the loss in family income.

Children are especially susceptible to farmwork-related injuries, but it is legal for a child as young as 10 to work on a farm, and we see farmworker children of all ages in the fields. Industrial farms have greater occupational hazards compared to family farms from a generation



ago. According to the US Department of Agriculture, in 2009 there were 15,876 farmwork injuries to youth under the age of 20, 6,912 of them to children aged 10 to 15. These numbers are nationwide, but North Carolina leads the US in tobacco and sweet potato production and is a major producer of other hand-picked crops, so we must assume that a considerable amount of these injuries are in our state. On-farm injuries are obvious, but other effects take longer to manifest. Exposure to nicotine, heat, and chemicals can cause a variety of long-term health problems and drastically reduce life expectancy, and chronic musculoskeletal injuries are very common in young workers with growing bodies.

North Carolina is the nation's largest producer of tobacco, a crop known to cause particular harm to youth; nicotine absorbed through the skin in a day's work is equivalent to smoking 36 cigarettes, and heavy pesticide use and the stifling heat in the plant rows take their toll on children, whose low body mass and developing organs cannot process these chemicals. During the agricultural season of 2013, over 100 children within a 60-mile radius of Kinston, North Carolina were observed as actively employed tobacco workers. The ages of children ranged from 10 to 18. Most were employed by labor contractors and many worked unlimited hours and days *legally* due to the federal agricultural exemption for child labor. NC FIELD directly observed children vomiting from obvious exposure to nicotine and/or chemicals; working in heavy rain downpours; and without access to bathrooms or hand-washing facilities. Even as state and federal agencies fund 'adolescent tobacco prevention' curriculums and we require a minimum age of eighteen to purchase tobacco products, rural children continue to be at risk in working environments that are unethical and dangerous.

This problem will not go away without the mobilization of North Carolinian constituents and without the concerted efforts of Governor McCrory's office. The complexity of these issues means that there is no one law to be enacted and no quick easy fix. However, Governor McCrory can be guided by the statements of his proclamation, and he can insist that existing regulations are enforced to protect the safety and dignity of farmworkers. Finally – and most importantly – Governor McCrory can strengthen the state's protection of children by raising the minimum age requirement for children working on farms other than their own family's farm. To address this problem of dangerous child labor is *not* to condemn farming in this state; rather, it is to ensure the integrity, health, education, and development of agricultural worker communities in North Carolina. We should never forget that these communities not only bring food to our tables, but also generate enormous revenue for the state. NC FIELD hopes Governor McCrory's proclamation can initiate the beginning of this much-needed change.



NC FIELD is a non-profit organization based in Kinston, North Carolina whose mission is to forge relationships to fill service gaps in the farmworker community, and to increase awareness of the plight of the farmworker. NC FIELD is part of several farmworker coalitions and collaborates with universities and press interested in agricultural and farmworker issues. NC FIELD serves on the board of the North Carolina AgroMedicine Institute, which encouraged McCrory to establish a Farm Safety and Health Week.

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