

Report Highlights Child Labor On US Tobacco Farms

The Associated Press

RICHMOND, Va. (AP) — An international rights group is pushing the federal government and the tobacco industry to take further steps to protect children working on U.S. tobacco farms.

A report released Wednesday by Human Rights Watch claims that children as young as 7 are sometimes working long hours in fields harvesting nicotine- and pesticide-laced tobacco leaves under sometimes hazardous conditions. Most of what the group documented is legal, but it wants cigarette makers to push for safety on farms from which they buy tobacco.

Human Rights Watch details findings from interviews with more than 140 children working on farms in North Carolina, Kentucky, Tennessee and Virginia, where a majority of the country's tobacco is grown.

"The U.S. has failed America's families by not meaningfully protecting child farmworkers from dangers to their health and safety, including on tobacco farms," said Margaret Wurth, children's rights researcher and co-author of the report.

Human Rights Watch met with many of the world's biggest cigarette makers and tobacco suppliers to discuss its findings and push them to adopt or strengthen policies to prevent the practices in their supply chains.

The companies say they are concerned about child labor in their supply chains and have developed standards, including requiring growers to provide a safe work environment and adhere to child labor laws, the group said.

"This report uncovers serious child labor abuses that should not occur on any farm, anywhere," Andre Calantzopoulos, CEO of Philip Morris International Inc., the world's second-biggest cigarette seller, said in a statement. "More work remains to be done to eliminate child and other labor abuses in tobacco growing."

Altria Group Inc., owner of the nation's biggest cigarette maker, Philip Morris USA, said it wants suppliers to follow the law. But Altria spokesman Jeff Caldwell also said that restricting tobacco work to people 18 and over "is really contrary to a lot of the current practices that are in place in the U.S. and is at odds in these communities where family farming is really a way of life."

About 736,500 children under 18 were reported to have worked on U.S. farms in 2012, but there are no figures for children working on tobacco farms, according to the federally funded National Children's Center for Rural and Agricultural Health and Safety.

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Less than 1 percent of U.S. farmland grows tobacco, according to the 2012 Census of Agriculture.

According to the Human Rights Watch report, 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. With their parent's permission, children as young as 12 can be hired for unlimited hours outside of school hours on a farm of any size. And there's no minimum age for children to work on small farms.

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

Nearly three-quarters of the children interviewed in 2012 and 2013 reported vomiting, nausea and headaches while working on tobacco farms. The symptoms they reported are consistent with nicotine poisoning often called Green Tobacco Sickness, which occurs when workers absorb nicotine through their skin while handling tobacco plants.

Those interviewed, many of whom were children of Hispanic immigrants but were often U.S. citizens themselves, also reported worked long hours, often in extreme heat, without overtime pay or sufficient breaks and wore no, or inadequate, protective gear.

"The conditions are inhumane and they should improve them," said 17-year-old Erick Garcia, of Kinston, North Carolina, who has been working in tobacco fields since he was 11. His parents were also farm workers, and he started working with them to help the 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 started worked in tobacco fields when he was 10 and now farms about 100 acres of tobacco in Shelby County, Kentucky, said he adheres to federal regulations to keep his workers safe but 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."

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