

# Tobacco's perils visit a Mexican village

## Pesticides stake a claim on farmers

By Marion Lloyd  
GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

**SANTIAGO IXCUINTLA, Mexico** — David de la Cruz, a Huichol Indian farmworker, was harvesting tobacco last month when a crop duster flew overhead, dousing him with toxic pesticides.

De la Cruz vomited for three days. But he never thought to see a doctor.

"What could I do? I have to work," said De la Cruz, a 46-year-old tobacco picker who makes \$7 a day threading the waxy leaves onto giant needles that are sold to American cigarette companies.

Like hundreds of other Huichol Indians who migrate into the heart of western Nayarit state for the three-month harvesting season, De la Cruz and his family live literally off the land, sleeping, bathing, and eating among the tobacco plants.

That means daily exposure to the tons of pesticides and other chemicals that are dumped on the plants, at the instruction of the US and European tobacco companies — including Philip Morris and British American Tobacco. As a nonfood crop, tobacco is subject to less stringent pesticide laws than vegetables and fruits.

Nayarit, Mexico's tobacco region, has the country's most pesticide poisonings; government figures report an average of nearly 300 cases and several deaths per year, among a population of 1 million.

Activists say those numbers do not represent the extent of the problem, since most victims never see a doctor. In contrast, California, regarded to have one of the most accurate systems of pesticide poisoning reporting in the United States, reported 448 cases last year among a population of 36 million, according to the Pesticide Action Network, based in San Francisco.

The problem is not restricted to the tobacco industry. Hundreds of cases of pesticide poisoning have been reported among Mexicans growing flowers and exotic vegetables. Their export has flourished under the North American Free Trade Agreement.

"If the problem is bad here, we know that it's magnitudes worse in Mexico," said Marzaret Reeves,



GLOBE PHOTO/MARION LLOYD

**Huichol children played under tobacco plants in Santiago Ixcuintla, Mexico, where pesticide perils have taken a toll.**

used, say local landowners are ultimately responsible for protecting their workers. That duty includes warning workers when the companies plan to use crop dusters over their fields, tobacco officials said.

"We finance them and give them all the chemicals. But realistically, our supervisor can't be with them all day," said Matias Gomez, who directs Philip Morris's operations in Nayarit. "At the end of the day, they are free to decide how to treat their workers, where to get them from and what to give them."

Gomez said the US tobacco firm, which manufactures 60 percent of cigarettes sold in Mexico, was working to reduce the risks for workers in Nayarit. He cited pilot projects that use toxic pesticides and new varieties of tobacco that do not require so many chemicals.

The four major tobacco companies operating in the region have also funded day-care centers in Santiago Ixcuintla for the children of migrant workers, which provide meals and schooling to several hundred children, while reducing the incidence of child labor. And Gomez said the companies plan to launch a pilot project next year that would provide temporary housing for some 400 workers.

"Of course we are concerned," he said.

Effects from pesticide poisoning range from nausea and vomiting to debilitating nerve diseases, birth defects, leukemia, and respiratory failure.

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ernment health workers acknowledged that the law is difficult to enforce, particularly among Indian workers, many of whom cannot read the Spanish-language warnings on the pesticides. Protective equipment — if available — is prohibitively expensive at \$100 for a full-body suit.

"I guess I could use a mask, if I could find one," said Rafael Fausto, who was spraying the pesticide Acrobat, which is reported to cause sterility and birth defects, on a tobacco field near Santiago Ixcuintla. The tank on his back was separated from his skin only by a thin flannel shirt.

"They say this one is better, but how do I know?" Fausto said of the chemical. He spoke of how he had quit spraying pesticides for four years after he was poisoned while spraying Lannate in the mid-1990s.

Fausto was biding his time before he could return to Kentucky's tobacco fields, where he has worked as a migrant laborer for four years. "There, they take care of people," he said, describing an airy cabin with a kitchenette that he shared with other Mexican migrants.

Here, he said, "the companies never offer to help. They just let you die."

prolonged contact with the chemicals significantly lowered levels of the enzyme, which is essential for normal functioning of the human nervous system. The project was directed by Mexican activist Patricia Diaz, whose award-winning 1994 documentary on pesticide poisoning among Huichols has prompted health officials to confront the problem.

In 1999, the Mexican government launched a joint campaign with the tobacco and pesticide companies to educate workers on how to protect themselves from the chemicals. The committee also organized the clean-up of thousands of empty pesticide containers that once littered the countryside.

The government claims the measures have helped reduce the number of poisonings from 855 in 1996 to 283 last year.

But Diaz and other critics question those statistics.

"The situation in the countryside is the same as it was 10 years ago," said Luz Maria Cueto, a leading Mexican toxicologist who conducts training workshops for the agrochemical industry.

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*or tout ça... mais je le C'ouvoie quand mème!*  
*Catherine*

Juan, tu dois savoir tout ça... mais je te le donne qu...

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Among the most vulnerable are the local farmworkers who apply the pesticides, many of which contain chemicals that are either banned or strictly controlled in the United States. One of the most commonly used pesticides in Mexican tobacco fields, lannate, is prohibited for use except in certain US states. The pesticide, made by Dupont, the American chemical giant, is linked to many of the pesticide poisonings in Mexico, according to doctors here.

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"You have to understand that pesticides were designed to kill, and to kill whole armies," said Samuel Salinas, a Mexican sociologist who coauthored a study released last month on the health effects of pesticide use in Nayarit. "After World War II," Salinas said, US and European companies "unleashed chemicals on the agriculture sector with the idea that they be used with safeguards. But those don't exist in the north of Nayarit. There, there are no suits and masks like they have in Israel."

The study tested levels of the nerve enzyme cholinesterase among 448 Huichol farmworkers and local residents. It found that

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