

Worker Protection Standard Overview

In 1992, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency issued the Worker Protection Standard (WPS). The WPS offers occupational protections to over 2 million agricultural workers and pesticide handlers who work at over 600,000 agricultural establishments.

On January 2, 2017, EPA enacted key revisions to the WPS to decrease pesticide exposure incidents among farmworkers and their family members. According to EPA, the 2015 revisions to the WPS were intended to align farmworkers pesticide exposure protection with similar health protections afforded to other workers by the Occupational Safety & Health Act while taking into account the unique working environment of many agricultural jobs and balancing the needs of agricultural producers.

The WPS applies to all agricultural owners/employers when using a WPS-labeled pesticide product on an “agricultural establishment” directly related to the production of an “agricultural plant”. This includes, but is not limited to, grains, fruits and vegetables, wood fiber or timber products, turf, and flowering and foliage plants and trees for commercial purposes.

The standard is intended to protect agriculture workers, handlers and family members from being exposed to pesticides involved in plant production and to prevent adverse health effects resulting from pesticide exposure. The WPS requires owners and employers to (a) provide agricultural workers and pesticide handlers with information, and protection to minimize occupational pesticide exposure; and (b) protect family members from pesticide exposure while working, living and playing on their farm, ranch or nursery.

This MU Extension publication focuses on providing a general overview of the WPS.

Impacted agricultural employers

Nationally, owners/employers on approximately 890,000 agricultural establishments (farms, forests, nurseries) and another 45,000 commercial pesticide handling establishments are covered by WPS. These include:

- Owners/employers on agricultural establishments, forestry operations and nurseries engaged in outdoor or enclosed space production of agricultural plants. This includes, but is not limited to, grains, fruits and vegetables, wood fiber or timber products, turf, and flowering and foliage plants and trees for commercial purposes.
- Employers of researchers who help grow and harvest plants.
- Employers at commercial pesticide handling establishments.

Agricultural employees covered by WPS

The WPS primarily focuses on protecting agricultural employees from occupational injuries and death resulting from occupational exposure to agricultural pesticides. The two main categories of employees covered under the WPS are:

Pesticide handlers – those agricultural employees who are performing tasks such as mixing, loading or applying agricultural pesticides; cleaning, repairing, adjusting, handling, or loading equipment and containers that contain pesticides or pesticide residue; acting as a flagger; disposing of pesticides; cleaning or disposing of any open pesticide container, etc.

Agricultural workers – those who are employed (including self-employed) to perform tasks related to growing and harvesting agricultural plants including weeding, potting, watering, pruning and other tasks directly related to the production of agricultural plants.

Exceptions to the WPS

The following situations are exceptions to some or all of the WPS requirements:

- **Owners and immediate family members on family-owned farms** are exempt from many of the WPS requirements. Additional information

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on the WPS requirements related to owners and their immediate family members is provided in MU Extension publication G858, [Agricultural Owners, Family Labor and the Worker Protection Standard](https://extension.missouri.edu/publications/g858) (<https://extension.missouri.edu/publications/g858>).

- **Certified or licensed crop advisors** who perform crop advisor tasks are exempt from certain WPS provisions including pesticide safety training. Specific requirements and exceptions related to both certified/licensed and non-certified/licensed crop advisors can be found beginning on page 92 of the “How to Comply” Manual found in the Resources section.
- **Limited and narrow circumstances.** The WPS does not apply to the use of pesticides (a) on livestock and other animals; (b) in and around the home and farm buildings; (c) on home (non-commercial) gardens; (d) for control of vertebrate pests, unless directly related to production of an agricultural plant; (e) as an attractant or repellent in traps; or (f) on pasture or rangeland where the forage will not be harvested for any use.

Regulatory requirements overview

As stated earlier, EPA’s goal for revising the WPS was in part to provide those working in the agriculture sector and their family members with similar protections provided to workers in other occupational sectors. The revised rules and regulations focus on **eliminating pesticide exposure, mitigating pesticide exposure effects and informing all workers** (those who perform hand-labor tasks on pesticide-treated crops, such as harvesting, thinning, pruning) **and handlers** (those who mix, load and apply pesticides) about the health risks and preventive measures associated with protecting themselves and their family members from exposure to pesticides or pesticide residues through contact during application or contact with treated plants, contaminated clothing, airborne, etc. Below are the three focus outcomes—eliminate, mitigate, and inform—and the compliance requirement associated with each outcome.

Eliminate exposure to pesticides for workers and others by establishing requirements that:

- Prohibit applying pesticides or entering treated areas in a way that will expose others to pesticides.
- Establish restricted-entry intervals (REIs) for all pesticides and narrow restrictions on entering treated areas.
- Employers must provide their employees with the appropriate personal protective equipment (PPE) as identified on the label and training on the proper selection, use, maintenance and disposal of that equipment.

- Workers and others must be notified about treated areas.

Mitigate pesticide exposure by requiring employers/owners to:

- Provide workers and handlers with **decontamination supplies** including an ample supply of water, soap and single use towels for routine washing and emergency decontamination.
- Develop and implement an **emergency assistance plan** for their workers and handlers including providing information about the pesticide(s) they are using or may be exposed to and preparing in advance by arranging for transportation to a medical care facility in case someone is poisoned or injured by a pesticide.
- Implement restrictions to keep workers and other people out of the treated field and application exclusion zones during and after pesticide applications by:
 - Implementing restricted-entry intervals (REIs).
 - Notifying workers by oral warning and/or posted warning about applications and not to enter pesticide-treated areas during the REI.
 - Implementing protections for early entry by workers including providing labeling information, criteria for reentry, allowed tasks, reentry period and required early-entry personal protective equipment.

Informing employees about pesticide hazards including the following:

- Providing required pesticide safety training for all workers and handlers.
- Posting the WPS pesticide safety poster.
- Requiring that pesticide handlers and early-entry workers are informed and have access to pesticide label safety information.
- Requiring a centrally located listing of recent pesticide treatments on the establishment.

The following are additional requirements for employers of pesticide handlers:

- Implement restrictions during applications to assure that pesticides applied do not contact workers or other people.
- Inform handlers that they must suspend an application if workers or other people are in the application exclusion zone.
- Monitor handlers working with toxic pesticides.
- Provide access to labeling information for handlers.
- Take steps to ensure application equipment safety.
- Provide handlers with the appropriate PPE and provide training related to the proper selection, care, maintenance, and storage of PPE and disposal of contaminated PPE.

- For additional information related to the selection and use of personal protective equipment identified on the label, employers and trainers may want to review MU Extension publication G1917, [Personal Protective Equipment for Working with Pesticides](https://extension.missouri.edu/publications/g1917) (https://extension.missouri.edu/publications/g1917). It provides additional information to assist in identifying and selecting appropriate PPE. Employers should also review MU Extension publication G1914, [Laundering Pesticide-Contaminated Clothing](https://extension.missouri.edu/publications/g1914) (https://extension.missouri.edu/publications/g1914), which discusses the proper way to handle and care for clothing worn during the application of pesticides.
- Provide medical evaluation, fit-test respirators and provide respirator training for any handler employees.

Resources

[Pesticide Worker Protection Standard “How to Comply” Manual](https://www.epa.gov/pesticide-worker-protection-standard-how-to-comply-manual). United States Environmental Protection Agency in conjunction with the Pesticide Educational Resources Collaborative, 2016. (https://www.epa.gov/

pesticide-worker-safety/pesticide-worker-protection-standard-how-comply-manual)

[G858, Agricultural Owners, Family Labor and the Worker Protection Standard](https://extension.missouri.edu/publications/g858). MU Extension, 2021. (https://extension.missouri.edu/publications/g858)
[G857, Worker Protection: Employer’s Guide to Worker Protection Standard Compliance](https://extension.missouri.edu/publications/g857). MU Extension, 2021. (https://extension.missouri.edu/publications/g857)

Contacts

- For more information about WPS, contact
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 - [Your local MU Extension Center](https://extension.missouri.edu/locations)
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