

Don't sleep on the WPS

During the administration of Barack Obama, the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) expanded the rules for agricultural operations to protect workers from pesticide exposure. These rules make up the Worker Protection Standard (WPS).

With a new administration, the same rules apply. While not passed by Congress, these rules are very real and the nursery and greenhouse industry across the nation must comply.

Some of the rules are pretty basic, and they reflect current practice — “don't spray people” would be one example. Other regulatory elements, however, collide with existing agricultural practices. That impact is where your association comes in.

How can we help OAN members comply with the federal rules and protect their workers, all without disruption to what you do? It turns out we have a plan. We have aligned with a certified trainer who will explain how you can keep the weight of federal and state regulators off your shoulders.

Last year at the OAN Convention, experts from the Oregon Department of Agriculture (ODA), Oregon State University (OSU) and our agricultural partner, Oregon Farm Bureau Federation, shared basic information about the WPS and what was coming for the year. Out of that issue discussion, the OAN pressed ODA, OSU and the State Accident & Insurance Fund (SAIF) to provide training materials before the regulatory citations and fines go into effect in 2019.

Industry trainings began in June and will continue through July, followed by webinars in August. What I noticed most during the June trainings was the requirement that all new employees must undergo pesticide training before reporting to work. The employer must keep a record of training employees.

What is the WPS?

The WPS was written by the EPA to reduce the risk of pesticide poisoning among agricultural workers and pesticide handlers.

It's enforced differently in each state; in Oregon, the Oregon Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) enforces the standard.

The WPS applies when a pesticide with the words “agricultural use requirements” on the product label is used on plants grown or sold at outlets such as retail nurseries or greenhouses. It covers agricultural workers (people involved in the production of agricultural plants) and pesticide handlers (people who mix, load, or apply crop pesticides) who work on farms and in forests, nurseries, and greenhouses.

What is not commonly understood is that the WPS is in effect with both restricted use AND general use pesticide applications. Exceptions apply for families (as defined by page 88-91 in the “How to Comply” Manual), ag-use pesticides that are used post-harvest, and ag-use pesticides that are used to protect structures or weeds in non-crop areas.

The WPS basics require employers to inform employees about pesticide safety; protect them from potential pesticide exposure; and mitigate pesticide exposures if they should occur. Annual safety training is required, with an emphasis on critical training points for both workers and handlers, central posting sites and record retention, and stringent rules about the Application Exclusion Zones (AEZ). Restricted Entry Intervals are a critical control point for the health and safety of the agricultural workforce.

Commitment to safety and innovation

The nursery and greenhouse industry in Oregon is committed to the safety of its workers through collaboration with ODA, USDA and OSU Extension. Proper pesticide application allows the nursery industry to thrive as a traded sector and grow and sell high-quality plant material.

As stewards of the land and environment, we are seeking innovations to improve pesticide application and reduce spray drift. Over the past two years, a team with representatives from USDA, OSU, the Ohio State University and the University of Tennessee have tested new technology for a pesticide sprayer that could reduce chemical volume by 50 percent and be friendlier to the environment. This type of innovation, as well



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as integrated pest management practices and collaboration between federal, state and local entities will ensure that we continue as a leader in the agricultural sector.

Training and resources

Providing training and resources is critical to your success. In conjunction with OSU and ODA, the OAN secured USDA Specialty Crop Grant funds to conduct trainings throughout the Willamette Valley, bringing the content to you. I am proud that the OAN is offering training to all nursery industry operators whether they are members or not. The industry must comply and that means all of us.

I am also pleased that SAIF is joining us as a partner to provide our members with WPS DVDs and central posting materials in both English and Spanish. By the time you read this, the OAN will have shipped DVDs and the safety posters to every grower, greenhouse and retail operator as a member benefit.

The OAN has also created a members-only landing page with the latest training and information tools relating to the WPS (www.oan.org/wps). We will conduct two more regional training sessions: July 20 at Monrovia in Dayton, Oregon and July 23 at Alpha Nursery Inc. in Salem, Oregon.

Certified pesticide applicators will receive pesticide credits. Remember: there is no grace period for WPS training and the association is doing everything it can to provide you with critical information to ensure compliance with this standard.

WPS compliance is a big deal. The OAN is working hard to make sure you have every tool to train and protect your workers and your operation. A safe work environment is what you do every day! ©