

## **FORMER LAKE APOPKA FARMWORKERS – A CASE OF ENVIRONMENTAL INJUSTICE**

### **Chronic Health Problems Plague Many Former Farmworkers Who Were Exposed to Pesticides**

Farmworkers feed the world. Mostly people of color, farmworkers tend to be victims of environmental injustice. They are exposed to toxic pesticides in their workplaces and homes. The EPA Worker Protection Standards that were developed to require things, such as agricultural worker training and posting of pesticide applications, were not implemented until the mid-1990's. Even now, enforcement of pesticide regulations is lax, at best.

Just outside the rapidly expanding tourist destination of Central Florida, a community of people is virtually invisible, in spite of the fact that their hard work fed our nation for over half a century. In the backyard of this tourist mecca reside hundreds of former farmworkers that worked for generations on the vegetable farms on the north shore of Lake Apopka. Fifty years of pesticide and fertilizer run-off to the lake resulted in Lake Apopka becoming the state's most contaminated large lake. While the impacts of banned pesticides – DDT, toxaphene, chlordane, aldrin, endrin, to name a few – on wildlife and the environment have been researched and studied, the people who were exposed to the same pesticides for years, even lifetimes, have yet to see any effort to address their health concerns.

Alligators on Lake Apopka have low reproductive rates, hormonal abnormalities, and stunted sexual organs linked to a spill of organochlorine pesticides, specifically DDT, at the Tower Chemical Company Superfund site on the south shore of the lake. The winter of 1998-99 saw one of the worst bird mortality incidents in the history of the United States. The bird deaths were eventually linked to a persistent pesticide – toxaphene – that had been banned years earlier but persisted in tissue of the fish that were food for the migrating birds.

Every day, scientific research is discovering more health effects on humans and wildlife from exposure to hormone or endocrine-disrupting chemicals – such as the organochlorine pesticides that were used on Lake Apopka and that persist in the soil and wildlife even today. The farmworkers who worked for years, even generations, want answers. They are suffering from a variety of debilitating chronic illnesses. If alligators and birds were impacted by the toxic pesticides, what does that mean for them? Many feel that their illnesses are linked to decades of pesticide exposure. Many of those same farmworkers live in a community that, also, hosts a medical waste incinerator, a sewage treatment plant, three landfills, and plastic manufacturing industries. Those in the Zellwood community are in close proximity to the Drum Chemical Company Superfund site. Former workers living in the Winter Garden area have concerns about the nearby Tower Chemical Company Superfund site.

The former Lake Apopka farmworkers would like to see EPA take action on their concerns. It has been ten years since the EPA was first tasked with studying endocrine disrupting chemicals. Farmworkers would like biomonitoring studies to determine pesticide levels in their bodies. They would like to see the research that was supposed to have begun years ago be expedited. They would like to see their communities cleaned up to protect the health of their children and grandchildren. After a lifetime of hard work, they would like someone to pay attention to their concerns.

Final note: The story of the Lake Apopka farmworkers is one that requires our notice and attention. Our collective conscience must address their concerns. But, their story has implications for the country as a whole, as we learn more and more about the properties and results of endocrine disrupting chemicals in our environment.

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