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UNPROTECTED: Farm workers in rural Paraíso de Cartago, east of San José, spray crops with Lannate – a pesticide deemed “highly dangerous” by the Agriculture Ministry – without wearing safety masks or gloves. Tico Times/Jeffrey Arguedas

Pesticide Use Poorly Monitored

BY ROBERT GOODIER
Tico Times Staff

EARLY one morning last October, Cartago farmer Marco Ramírez pumped insecticide spray on to rows of *chayote* squash from underneath the vines strung along wires six feet above the ground in the rural town of Paraíso de Cartago, about an hour east of San José.

His gas-powered pump threw the spray into the air, where the wind blew it toward the Yas Elementary School, located at the edge of his squash field. The poisonous cloud entered the school and the lungs, eyes and mouths of the 45

children and four teachers there.

Guiselle Argüello, a teacher at Yas who lives in the neighboring city of Cartago, said she recalled smelling “a strong odor” that, unfamiliar with farm work, she did not recognize.

“I asked the children what it could be and they said it was poison,” she told The Tico Times this week.

The children told the teacher they felt dizzy. They complained that their eyes stung, their mouths were dry and they felt nauseous. The Red Cross responded to a teacher’s call, took five children to the hospital in (Page 10)

Nicaraguans Allege Abuse

Police Sweep Probed

BY STEVEN J. BARRY
Tico Times Staff

A “crime-prevention” bust during which hundreds of Nicaraguan immigrants were detained and forced to show documentation last week has prompted a request by the Nicaraguan government for an investigation into possible human rights violations during the operation.

President Abel Pacheco said Tuesday that he spoke with Nicaraguan President Enrique Bolaños by telephone, and that the situation has not damaged the relationship between the neighboring countries.

Costa Rican police “did not violate any human rights. They did not enter one home. They cordially asked for people to present their documents,” Pacheco said.

The Public Security Ministry reported that 246 immigrants were detained, 22 of whom will probably be deported. The ministry also announced that police recovered 23 false residency identification cards from Nicaraguans.

NICARAGUAN Ambassador to Costa Rica Néstor Membreño said this week his government has asked for an “exhaustive” investigation to reveal whether there was any abuse by police.

“There is (television) video that shows that in reality, they did not proceed in the correct manner,” Membreño said.

Costa Rican Immigration Director Marco Badilla told The Tico Times that the very fact that the national press was allowed to be present during the operation and videotape it should serve as proof that police acted according to the law.

He also said immigration police comprised only a small portion of the multi-agency force that conducted the operation. Immigration officials said only 15 of the (Page 4)

Construction Sector Optimistic About 2004

BY FABIÁN BORGES
Tico Times Staff

CONSTRUCTION in Costa Rica grew 41% in 2003 compared to the year before, according to statistics released this week by the Costa Rican Construction Chamber.

“Last year was an above-average year,” chamber president Jaime Molina said Monday. “It was a record year for construction. In 2003, an additional 2,749,462 square meters were

constructed, compared to the average of 1,800,000 square meters reported in recent years. We believe this will also be a good year, possibly better than the last.”

However, leading construction companies consulted by The Tico Times claimed they had not felt the effects of the recent construction boom described by the chamber.

“IF the chamber’s numbers reflect an increase in construction, it was the result of a few very large projects such as the Four Seasons Resort (in the northwest province of Guanacaste) and new condominium projects west of San José,” Javier Leitón, of construction firm Bases Sólidas, told The Tico Times.

“The first semester of 2003 was difficult,” Leitón said. “During the second semester the situation began to slowly improve. The year concluded with stability, but it wasn’t a good year.”

According to the chamber’s report, most new investments in construction last year (58%) were in housing, which grew 25% and totaled 1,595,487 square meters. Four (Page 5)



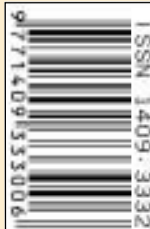
GOOD year: The Construction Chamber predicts this year will be even better than 2003, which it called “a record year for construction.”

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Painting With Fire “Weekend”



Farm Workers in Cartago Discover

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Cartago and the rest to the community medical center for treatment.

When squash farmer Ramírez morosely recalled that incident this week, he referred to it as “a nightmare.” He told The Tico Times he had never used that kind of pesticide before and was not aware of its potency.

The pesticide was Tamaron, manufactured in Bayer facilities in Guatemala and El Salvador.

COMMON wisdom among several farmers and two pesticide vendors in Paraíso interviewed by The Tico Times this week is that Tamaron should be used only on young squash vines located close to the ground.

Tamaron is classified as “highly dangerous” by the Ministry of Agriculture (www.protecnet.go.cr), and although it is approved for use in Costa Rica on a list of crops that includes cotton, tobacco, peppers, lettuce, cabbage and tomatoes, it is not permitted for use on *chayote* squash.

“I didn’t know it was prohibited,” Ramírez said. “If it’s illegal, why is it available in every store around here?”

Tamaron manufacturer Bayer has not conducted a study of the pesticide on *chayote*, so consumer safety with that crop is unknown, explained a representative of the Agriculture Ministry.

Oscar Ávila, from the Ministry of Agriculture’s pesticide registry program, said farmers are required to present written authorization to pesticide vendors before they can buy restricted products.

HOWEVER, that system apparently is not in effect in the hills of Paraíso, where the most prevalent crop is *chayote* squash.



Tico Times/Jeffrey Arguedas

CONCERNED: Farm worker Gerardo Sánchez says he and his wife, María Auxiliadora Sanabria, bring their kids indoors to shelter them from the spray of pesticides he helps apply to nearby crops.

“Most farmers use Tamaron – it lasts the longest and *chayote* attracts a ton of diseases and insects,” Paraíso farmer Alfonso Castillo told The Tico Times. “There’s no control; they sell Tamaron to anybody.”

About 15 years ago, when Castillo began to use an unfamiliar pesticide, he was taken to the emergency room for dizziness and nausea. He had sprayed the mist upward into the *chayote* vines with his sleeves rolled up, shirt open and skin exposed.

At the hospital, he had to remove all his clothes and bathe before the sickness passed. Now, he wears long-sleeved shirts and a protective mask, but does not wear gloves because they make him too hot, he said.

ABOUT 7,500 farmers poison themselves through the improper use of pesticides every year in Costa Rica, according to a study by a branch of the Ministry of Health, released in August 2003.

Another shocking statistic revealed in

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Dangers of Pesticides By Trial and Error

the study is that the average Costa Rican ingests two kilograms of pesticides per year – more than three times the worldwide average estimated by the World Health Organization.

The Health Ministry study was conducted as part of a project called Occupational and Environmental Aspects of the Exposure to Pesticides in Central America (PLAGSALUD). Funded by the Danish Agency for International Development in association with the Panamerican Health Organization, the project documented the effects of pesticides on people and the environment, compiled statistics of pesticide-related poisonings and deaths since 1994, and the results of its own efforts to curb accidents in Costa Rica.

THE study includes an eye-opening digest of the havoc prolonged exposure to pesticides can cause in the human body, such as cancer, mutations and sterility, among others.

The crops that undergo the heaviest bombardment of poisons in Costa Rica are ornamental flowers, bananas, potatoes, rice, pineapples and oranges.

The Agriculture Ministry's Web site contains 2,663 different agricultural chemicals, of which 33 are restricted or prohibited in the country.

A 2002 PLAGSALUD study revealed that the vast majority of pesticide-induced poisonings in Costa Rica go unreported.

In a survey conducted in 2002, small and mid-sized farmers represented the largest part of those poisoned (51%), followed by laborers (17%) and housewives (13%).

Between 1996 and 2002, 160 people died from pesticide exposure or ingestion, of which just over half were deemed suicides.



Tico Times/Jeffrey Arguedas

UNINTENTIONAL harm: Farmer Marco Ramírez says he still feels remorse about inadvertently intoxicating students and teachers at the Yas Elementary School next to his chayote squash farm.

At its inception in 1994, PLAGSALUD began an educational campaign to warn people against the misuse of pesticides. Billboards flashing the message "all pesticides kill" sprung up in rural areas and more victims of poisoning began to report their cases to health officials.

The most telling result of the effort, according to the 2003 report, is a steady decrease in poisonings in the Alajuela province since 1999. Especially notable is the drop in poisonings in the northern zone

county of Upala, within the Alajuela province, from 102.1 to 37.15 per 100,000 people over a three-year period.

THOSE statistics may not mean much to farm workers in Paraíso, where education appears to be a missing ingredient in the task of farming with dangerous agrochemicals.

Gerardo Sánchez lives with his wife and kids in a humble shack beside a field of chayote squash, and breathes in the bil-

lows of Tamarón the wind carries into his yard in Paraíso.

"It makes us dizzy," said Sánchez, a laborer at the farm. "We take the kids inside to keep them away from it."

He claimed the farmers do not explain the proper use of those chemicals to their workers, and that workers, himself included, bear the ill effects without complaint to authorities.

IN a nearby field, farmers Milton Martínez and Henry Calderón pumped a lever on canisters strapped to their backs to spray their cabbages with Lannate. Neither wore gloves or a mask.

Martínez told The Tico Times Lannate is a fertilizer, is safe and, by strengthening the plant, prevents insects from attacking the leaves.

Unlike some of the chayote farmers, he was using his chemical on the right plant. But what he apparently does not know is that Lannate is a pesticide manufactured by DuPont Agricultural Products in the United States and classified as "highly dangerous" by the Ministry of Agriculture.

BACK in the chayote field, farmer Ramírez said he is unaware of PLAGSALUD's work, and claims the Ministry of Agriculture does not give pesticide-use instruction of any kind to farmers like himself.

Aura Jiménez, director of the pesticide registry program, said the Ministry of Agriculture does give free classes in pesticide use, and farmers need only call for information (260-8300, ext. 2113).

Ramírez told The Tico Times he had learned his lesson after unintentionally poisoning the school children, and is now extremely careful with the chemicals he uses.

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