

Letter from Washington

Doing the Right Thing

Persevering for change

"If you do the right thing long enough, then good things will happen – like contracts, agreements, breakthroughs."

Baldemar Velasquez, president of the Farm Labor Organizing Committee (FLOC), told us this in the speech he gave to Beyond Pesticides' 21st National Pesticide Forum, *Toxics in the Age of Globalization*, in Austin, Texas, April 26, 2003. (Excerpts of his speech are transcribed for this issue of *Pesticides and You* (PAY).) Mr. Velasquez should know. He formed FLOC in 1967, led a historic 600-mile march of 100 farmworkers from FLOC headquarters in Toledo, Ohio to Campbell's Soup Company offices in Camden, New Jersey in 1983, and three years later negotiated the first three-way pact in labor history, one between Campbell's, Ohio tomato growers, and the farmworkers who harvest the fields. Now, the target is Mt. Olive Pickle Company, as the struggle for adequate wages, health benefits and safety continues.

Baldemar Velasquez teaches us to understand and attack specific problems within the broader picture. He says, "Certainly the environmental issues that farmworkers face are not limited to the exposure to dangerous pesticides. Generally, the working conditions of farmworkers are a national disgrace. It is not only disgraceful, but it is shameful for the richest country in the world to continue to ignore and neglect some of the hardest working people in America." Pesticides are a piece, an important piece, of the injustices and inhumane conditions that farmworkers endure. Mr. Velasquez asks us to join the boycott of Mt. Olive in an effort to change the conditions that we all believe are not acceptable.

Looking at the larger picture

The news pieces that are contained in this issue of PAY paint a vivid picture. The picture looks something like this: data on the hazards of pesticides keeps stacking up, at the same time that successful experiences with alternatives are recorded. People are harmed, endangered species are threatened, while the courts intervene to stop hazardous pesticide use. This picture captures a cycle that repeats itself over and over again.

In this issue, we cover the bad news: pesticides linked to birth defects, the death of 58 cows due to pesticide poisoning, and new documentation of continued contamination of the water supply. But then, we cover the good news: integrated pest management (the kind that eliminates toxic chemical use) works in an East Harlem study conducted by Mount Sinai Medical Center, while researchers document microscopic crustaceans that love to eat mosquito larvae, a promising alternative to pesticide use. Meanwhile, the courts are stopping the bad guys: restricting 54 pesticides that threaten endangered species, extending the right-to-sue to Vietnam War veterans exposed to Agent Orange, and stopping the indiscriminate aerial application of hazardous herbicides in the U.S.-funded Columbian drug war. Even EPA jumped in by issuing the largest fine in its history for violations of the [farm]worker protection standards.

This issue of PAY also reminds us that the marketplace is a dangerous place, with misinformation about product hazards. At the same time, we see the power of local and state governments being used to protect public health and safety, incredibly important in the absence of adequate federal protection. The wood-treating industry is still misleading the public on the safety of pressure-treated wood with arsenic and chromium VI, as it is sold in stores and by construction companies for decks and fences until supplies are exhausted. This goes on despite the wood treating industry agreements with EPA to warn consumers about product hazards. And, the state of Maine jumped in to expedite the federal phase-out of treated wood, while the City of Lyndhurst, Ohio voted 'no' on spraying for mosquitoes, given data and uncertainties about pesticide hazards and the lack of efficacy associated with spray programs.

Up against special interests

The power of change rests with our ability to keep pushing and doing the right thing in our purchasing practices, town and city policies, school policy and through increased accountability of elected officials. We must call for protection of workers and the public in a political climate that seemingly ignores our call and undermines agreements to move changes in laws that are intended to protect health and safety. As we know, special interest politics in Congress are pervasive. Here's a pesticide industry example. Despite Congressional agreements back in 1996 to increase regulatory review of pesticide impacts on children under the *Food Quality Protection Act* (FQPA), the chemical industry for the past six years has orchestrated legislative riders that deny EPA the funds to move the program ahead. That may change this year with an effort now underway in Congress. (*For more information, go to www.beyondpesticides.org.*) Any way you look at it, the chemical industry, having the upper hand in Congress, has shifted the costs of reviewing its highly profitable chemicals to taxpayers, reduced its bill by hundreds of millions of dollars, and slowed the review process.

Power of persistence

We are doing the right thing. Increasingly, practitioners of pest management, want to do the right thing, standing up with us in public forums, attaining new standards of safety, rejecting risk-assessment based claims of safety, and embracing the precautionary principle of avoiding the use of toxic chemicals whenever possible. *Best wishes for a happy and healthy holiday season!*



—Jay Feldman is executive director of Beyond Pesticides.