

Testimonies of Costa Rican workers recently injured by paraquat

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On April 4 and April 11, 2002 workers and farmers were interviewed in Cariari de Pococi in the Atlantic Region of Costa Rica with regard to their use of Gramoxone or paraquat and health effects. The interviewed workers gave permission to use their names and pictures. The following testimonies were recorded:

Testimony 1. Marco Tulio Hernández, age 48.

This worker was spraying Gramoxone on a banana plantation on November 25, 2000. His backpack was leaking on the top and the liquid fell on his arm. After three hours he noted a burning sensation and redness on the inner surface of his upper right arm. He stopped working and showered thoroughly. Next day, the foreman sent him out spraying again with the same defective backpack, because there was no other available. He sprayed another three hours and when the pain worsened he interrupted the spraying with nausea, burning sensation in the mouth, and abdominal pain. The local doctor told him to put toothpaste on the wound until he could be seen at the occupational health service. On the fourth day he was attended there with a blistering lesion of 15 by 20 cm. The wound did not heal and he had to be hospitalized twice for a skin transplantation. He was on sickleave for nine months. Back on the job he was sent out to spray again, but when he refused he was fired. This same worker had a previous chemical burn ten years earlier that took three months to heal. A few years ago he splashed Gramoxone in the eye with a subsequent conjunctivitis despite immediate rinsing.



Testimony 2. Jose Francisco Sáenz, age 17.



Although in Costa Rica it is not allowed that children under 18 work with pesticides, this young worker has been in contact with pesticides since he was 12 years old. In January 2002 he suffered burns (redness, swelling and blisters) on his back, buttocks, testicles and both thighs after paraquat spraying with a leaking backpack on a watermelon farm. He also presented nausea, vomiting and shortness of breath. He had no medical attention and the lesions took two weeks to heal. A few days ago he was instructed to spray Gramoxone on a banana plantation, but he quit due to intolerance to the smell, nausea, vomiting, dizziness, and burning sensation in the throat.

Testimony 3. Alex, age 33.

This former banana worker, now a small farmer, has used Gramoxone for many years and has never felt any symptoms. Since he thinks that paraquat does not affect him, he does not take any precautions. He keeps the area around the house “clean” by spraying every six to eight weeks, while his children and animals are close. He prepares the spraying mixture at the side of the well inside the house, contaminating the well water with splashes and washing his dirty hands. He was very surprised when his neighbour Marvin Muñoz had an accident with the Gramoxone that he had given to him.



Well in the house where the Gramoxone spray mixture use to be prepared.

Testimony 4. Marvin Muñoz, age 33.

This small farmer of cassava, corn and beans had never used Gramoxone before he got a small amount from his neighbour, six weeks ago. His backpack leaked on the back, but he thought of it as water, or that maybe he was sweating a lot. A few days later he had developed second degree burns on his entire back that took three weeks to heal. He did not seek medical attention. At the moment of the interview, dark spots and recent scars on his lower back were still visible.



Marvin Muñoz, in front of his house in Cocotales de Cariari, will not use Gramoxone again.

Testimony 5. Roman Sosa, age 24.

This migrant worker from Nicaragua was spraying Gramoxone in September 2001 on a banana plantation. The top of the backpack was broken and the liquid was leaking on his back, down to his groin, legs and feet for two consecutive days. He sprayed seven hours a day. After the first day he noted pain and burning sensation with nausea, headache, abdominal pain and fever. He was put on sickleave for 9 days, but he had to go back to work when the wounds on his testicles were still not cured. Later the nails of his toes fell off and he has a permanent scar on his testicle.



Permanent lesions in toe nails after repeated loss of nails due to chronic paraquat contact.

Testimony 6. Mario Alcócer, age 42.

This worker has been a herbicide sprayer on a banana plantation for seven years. In September 2001, the hose of his backpack detached and he splashed diluted paraquat on his face, including mouth and eyes. He had a sickleave for a week because of conjunctivitis, dizziness, and headache. After this accident he has presented nosebleeds on four occasions. He has presented ocular damage with disabilities earlier on two occasions, both due to diluted paraquat.

Testimony 7. Vicente Tercero, age 31.

This migrant worker from Nicaragua was a herbicide sprayer on a banana plantation. About two years ago he started with severe nosebleeds, up to 20-30 occasions in one year. Because of that he stopped spraying, but six months ago he inhaled paraquat when was instructed to empty leftovers in used bottles of Gramoxone. He had again a severe nosebleed. This worker has never seen a doctor for the nosebleeds.

Testimony 8. Jose Lara, age 50.

This worker has been a herbicide sprayer for three years. He has lost his toenails twice and the ones he has grown now are damaged. He has had splashes in the eyes on three occasions, with mild redness after rinsing them with urine. He started to develop chronic general malaise with headache, vomiting, blurred vision, and lack of appetite. He recently stopped working with Gramoxone and has improved since.



Testimony 9. Oldemar Godinez, age 53.

This worker sprayed three weeks ago Gramoxone on his corn field. He had a spill on his back from the leaking backpack with, according to his saying, only mild injuries, redness and some blistering. The injuries were still visible at the time of interview. This worker was previously employed for five years on a banana plantation, when he frequently had to spray paraquat. During these five years he had four accidents with Gramoxone, one chemical burn in the groin which took two weeks to heal, one burn on his legs with a permanent scar, and one severe eye injury when he slipped and spilled diluted paraquat in his eyes which took three weeks to heal. On another occasion he contaminated an existing wound on his hand with a subsequent extreme swelling and infection and a recovery time of six months. Besides these accident he lost his toenails on multiple occasions and the ones he has now are permanently damaged. Eye irritation occurred also many times.



Signs of 6 week old skin lesions from paraquat contact due to a leaking backpack.