



## How Much Would a Wage Increase Cost?

Fresh market strawberries are packed by the picker into containers that are ready for sale. The most common industry standard packouts are trays of twelve pint boxes (approximately 12 oz. per pint) or of eight one-pound plastic clamshell boxes. Pay rates vary considerably, although the most common are a fixed hourly pay rate (in the range of \$4.60 per hour) plus a piece-rate "bonus" for each tray picked. For trays of eight one-pound boxes the bonus is typically \$.075 per tray, or \$.094 per one-pound box. Reported piece rate wages for trays of twelve pint boxes are in the range of \$1.20 to 1.50 per tray, or \$0.10 to \$0.125 per pint.

Reported piece rate wages are in the range of \$0.094 to \$0.125 per unit. Thus, an increase of the piece rate of just five cents per pint or one-pound box corresponds to a 40% to 53% increase in piece rate wages.

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## Five Cents for Fairness: The UFW Strawberry Campaign Goes Public

by Don Villarejo

During 1996 the United Farms Workers of America, AFL-CIO, (UFW) made its primary focus a new organizing drive among the estimated 20,000 strawberry pickers in the Watsonville-Salinas growing region of California's Central Coast. At the UFW's September convention, newly elected AFL-CIO President John Sweeney declared that the strawberry campaign was the most important union initiative in the U.S. and that the AFL-CIO had committed major financial and other resources to support it. But after months of house meetings, marches and protests, not a single strawberry farm worker is under union contract and no union representation elections were even held in the industry during 1996.

On November 13, 1996, the UFW embarked on a new tactic, one intended to garner public support for its drive to organize strawberry industry workers. A rally and press conference at the Washington, DC, headquarters of the AFL-CIO featured speeches of support from national labor chief Sweeney as well as by leaders of the National Organization for Women and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People.

UFW President Arturo Rodriguez announced that the new public campaign has two goals: to inform the American people about the deplorable conditions in the fields and to ask supermarket store managers across the nation to sign a pledge demanding that strawberry producers sign an industry-wide labor agreement with the union. The objective is reminiscent of the 1970 industry-wide table grape contract that ended the famous and successful grape boycott of the 1960s. Sweeney indicated that local AFL-CIO Labor Councils across the nation would be assisting the UFW in the new campaign. The first target area is Boston and the surrounding New England region, but in major cities such as Chicago local campaigns have already begun.

The new campaign falls just short of a boycott of California strawberries, but obviously carries an implied threat that one could follow if the demand for an industry-wide contract is not met. Clearly, the public education component of the campaign is designed to lay the groundwork for a possible boycott.

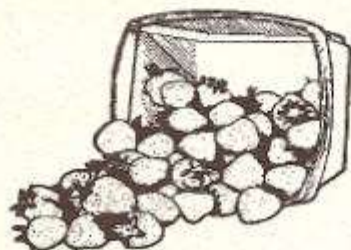
As part of this public education, at a November press conference the AFL-CIO released a new position paper titled *Five Cents for Fairness* that makes the case for a union contract. The title is derived from a California Institute for Rural Studies analysis of a possible wage increase that could result from a five cent increase in the retail price of a pint of strawberries (see "How Much Would a Wage Increase Cost?," page 1). Despite being fraught with inaccuracies, the paper presents a compelling case for improvements in wages and working conditions.

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In addition to public education endeavors, as many as three dozen UFW organizers are continuing their efforts to garner the support of strawberry workers in California's Central Coast production region centered in Watsonville. Though the growing season in the area ended with the arrival of winter rains and many pickers returned to Mexico for the holiday season, organizers are laying the groundwork for Spring 1997 when the new season begins.



Industry leaders claim that most strawberry workers don't want the union. Last August an estimated 5,000 to 7,000 growers and workers marched through Watsonville under the banner of the Pro-Worker Committee to express their opposition to the UFW. On its part, the union has also organized successful marches, bringing thousands of its supporters to the streets of the town.

The two sides in the organizing campaign are deeply divided, and it appears that neither is willing to compromise. Meanwhile, a new season is now underway with shipments from Southern California strawberry growing districts beginning to arrive in markets just as the new year begins. But there are no signs of union organizing in these Southern California fields. All of the UFW's resources are concentrated in the Watsonville-Salinas district. Organizing in the fields will begin this spring with the start of the new season.



**Table 1**  
Top Five Crops by Amount of Reported Pesticide Use, California, 1995 & 1994 (million pounds)

Crop	Amount, 1995	Amount, 1994
grapes, table & raisin	31.8	30.7
grapes, wine	27.0	27.5
cotton	17.7	15.1
almonds	12.0	14.4
tomatoes, processing	11.7	12.4

Source: Department of Pesticide Regulation, *Summary of Pesticide Use Report Data: Indexed by Commodity, 1995 and 1994*.

(PESTICIDE USE, from page 2)

particularly bad pest problem in the crop during 1995.

The only major commodities for which there were significant reductions in annual reported pesticide use were almonds and sugar beets. In almonds the year-to-year decline was 16%. While the total of bearing and non-bearing almond acreage actually expanded during 1995, the crop had a very bad year due to untimely late winter and early spring rains that destroyed much of the bloom, sharply reducing crop yields.

In sugar beets the decrease was 21%. However, acreage also fell, down by 18%. Thus, the decline in acreage could account for nearly all of the reduced pesticide use.

As in the case of commodities, there was little year-to-year change in the leading chemicals, as ranked by amount of use. Sulfur, an organic chemical which can be used in organic farming, continues to be the most important pesticide in California agriculture. Sulfur tops the list of pesticides by amount of reported use, followed by petroleum oil, methyl bromide, metam-sodium, and glyphosate. These five chemicals accounted for 59% of all reported pesticide use in the state in 1994.

What these data show is that pesticide use in California agriculture

continues to increase, reflecting a strong dependence of farm production on chemicals. There is no indication in the data that increased consumer interest in organically grown food products or sustainable farm practices has yet had any effect on total chemical use. Year-to-year changes in the total amount of pest control materials applied to specific crops are evidently mainly determined by changes in planted crop acreage or other major external factors such as weather.

**Resources:** Veda Federighi, California Department of Pesticide Regulation, 1020 N Street, Sacramento, CA 95814, Phone (916) 445-3974.

- The 1995 *Summary of Pesticide Use Report Data*, is available in two volumes, indexed by chemical or by commodity. Send \$10 for each volume to: Cashier, California Department of Pesticide Regulation, 1020 N Street, Sacramento, CA 95814-5624.

- To obtain information about purchasing the full computerized data base of the individual use reports, call the DPR Information Systems Branch, at (916) 445-4110.

