

Human Rights Watch

Children's Rights

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Altria Group Strengthens Its Child Labor Policy

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The decision by the US tobacco company Altria Group to prohibit growers in its supply chain from hiring children under 16 could protect children working on US tobacco farms, Human Rights Watch said today.

Altria Group parent to three US tobacco companies, including Philip Morris USA, the largest cigarette company in the US announced on December 11, 2014, that its new child labor standard will take effect beginning in 2015. Prior to this change, Altria Group deferred to US labor law for the minimum age to work, which allows children as young as 12 to work unlimited hours outside of school on a farm of any size, and has no minimum age for children to work on small farms.

Altria Group has taken an important step toward protecting younger children from the dangers of tobacco farming, said [Margaret Wurth](#), children's rights researcher at Human Rights Watch. The company should continue updating its child labor policy to protect all children from nicotine exposure and other serious health and safety risks.

Human Rights Watch in [a May 2014 report](#) found that child tobacco workers on US farms are exposed to nicotine, toxic pesticides, extreme heat, and other dangers. Most of the children interviewed reported nausea, vomiting, headaches, and dizziness all symptoms of acute nicotine poisoning.

Altria Group will also require parental consent for children under 18 working in tobacco farming. Both changes to the company's child labor standards will not cover children working on family farms.

The changes will be contractual requirements for all growers selling tobacco to Altria Group in 2015.

Reynolds American, parent of R.J. Reynolds, the second-largest US tobacco company and one of Altria Group's main competitors, does not have a child labor policy.

Human Rights Watch has [urged](#) 10 of the world's largest tobacco companies, including Altria Group and Reynolds American, to strengthen their child labor policies to protect all children under 18 from hazardous work on tobacco farms in their global supply chains, including any work involving direct contact with tobacco in any form.

Altria Group already prohibits tobacco workers under 18 from performing hazardous work, as defined by US law and regulations. However, US regulations lack any provisions to protect children from the risks of handling tobacco.

Some of the worlds largest tobacco companies, such as Philip Morris International, have definitions of hazardous work that are more protective than most national regulatory frameworks, but a clear industry-wide standard is needed, Human Rights Watch said. Human Rights Watch noted that current international standards defer to national regulations which are often inadequate and leave children at risk to determine what tasks are considered hazardous.

On December 10, the Eliminating Child Labor in Tobacco Growing (ECLT) Foundation announced that its members which include Altria Group and several other large international tobacco companies made [a commitment to end child labor](#) in their global supply chains in line with international labor law.

Human Rights Watch has also urged Congress and the Obama administration to strengthen US laws and regulations to protect children from the hazards of tobacco farming.

Even with the tobacco industrys recent push toward higher standards, none of the companies have policies that sufficiently protect children from the hazards of tobacco farming, Wurth said.

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