

Human Rights Watch

Children's Rights

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Burley Council Opposes Tobacco Work by Children Under 16 Worldwide

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The decision by a leading US tobacco growers organization to oppose hiring children under 16 to work on tobacco farms is an important step toward ending this hazardous labor practice, Human Rights Watch said today.

In July 2014, the [Council for Burley Tobacco](#), a Kentucky-based association representing approximately 5,000 tobacco growers in Kentucky, Tennessee, Indiana, and Ohio, approved a [resolution](#) adopting the position that workers under 16 years old should not be employed in tobacco production not only in the US but worldwide.

The Council for Burley Tobacco has taken a principled stance to protect the youngest workers from hazards in tobacco farming, said [Jane Buchanan](#), associate children's rights director at Human Rights Watch. The council and its members should build on this important step and expand the policy to cover all children under 18, in keeping with international labor standards.

On September 2, Rod Kuegel, president of the Council for Burley Tobacco, told Human Rights Watch in an email that the council would urge other grower groups internationally to follow its lead to prohibit hiring children. The Council for Burley Tobacco is a member of the [International Tobacco Growers Association](#), a Portugal-based nonprofit organization representing tobacco growers groups from more than 20 countries.

The council's resolution is the first publicly announced change in policy or practice from any tobacco industry group since Human Rights Watch in May documented [hazardous child labor on tobacco farms](#) in Kentucky, Tennessee, North Carolina, and Virginia.

Children ages 7 to 17 interviewed by Human Rights Watch said they were exposed to nicotine, toxic pesticides, and other dangers while working 50 to 60 hours a week in extreme heat on tobacco farms in the United States. Most said they got sick while working, with headaches, vomiting, dizziness, skin rashes, and other symptoms. Many of these symptoms are consistent with acute nicotine poisoning, an illness that occurs when workers absorb nicotine through the skin. Almost none of the children were given safety training or protective gear.

Children interviewed by Human Rights Watch worked on farms producing burley tobacco or flue-cured tobacco, which together make up the vast majority of tobacco grown in the US.

Human Rights Watch has urged 10 of the world's largest tobacco companies to prohibit children under 18 from doing hazardous work on farms in their global supply chains, including any work that involves direct contact with tobacco in any form. Global tobacco companies have a responsibility to establish clear policies prohibiting children from hazardous work in their supply chains, including through contractual requirements with tobacco growers, Human Rights Watch said.

The United Nations Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights reflect the expectation that businesses, including business associations such as growers groups, should respect human rights, avoid complicity in abuses, and adequately remedy them if they occur. The guiding principles specify that businesses should exercise due diligence by creating a system to identify, prevent, mitigate, and account for the impact of their activities on human rights.

Human Rights Watch has also urged the US Congress to enact legislation to protect child farmworkers from dangerous work in agriculture, including tobacco farming. A bill introduced in the House of Representatives on July 31 would amend US labor law to prohibit employment in which children under 18 come into direct contact with tobacco plants or dried tobacco leaves. The Obama administration should also take regulatory action to ban children from hazardous work on tobacco farms, Human Rights Watch said.

Under current US labor law, children as young as 12 can be hired for unlimited hours outside of school hours to work on a farm of any size with parental permission, and there is no minimum age for children to work on small farms. In all other sectors, children under 14 are prohibited from working, and 14 and 15-year-olds can only work for limited hours.

At 16, child farmworkers can do jobs deemed hazardous by the US Department of Labor. Children in all other sectors must be 18 to do hazardous work. There are no additional restrictions on childrens work in tobacco farming, despite the hazardous nature of the work.

Tobacco growers are stating clearly that hiring children isnt essential to the tobacco business, Buchanan said. Global tobacco companies should recognize that growers can be partners in the industrys efforts to take meaningful action to end hazardous child labor in tobacco farming.

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