

# Toxic Taters

Minnesotans not lovin' pesticide drift

The Toxic Taters coalition is made up of small farmers, White Earth tribal members, parents, grandparents, and other rural community members who are being affected by pesticides drifting from potato fields in northern Minnesota. We encourage and support agricultural production that does not harm people or animals or pollute the air or water.

We want food grown in ways that are healthy for us all, and we are calling on the McDonald's Corporation to ensure that the potatoes they buy are not harming Minnesota communities. **Will you join us?**

## Minnesota's potato pesticide problem

Potato fields cover 50,000 acres of Minnesota farmland, especially in the central and northwest parts of the state. When they're conventionally produced on a large scale, potatoes are a chemical-intensive crop. Fungicides are applied to 98% of Minnesota's potato acres.

At the height of the growing season, potato fields are sprayed with pesticides as often as every five days. These chemicals don't stay put — instead, they drift from potato fields onto neighboring farms, and into homes and schools.

After experiencing the harmful effects of potato production for years, community members in several Minnesota counties (Todd, Becker, Otter Tail, Wadena, and Mahnomen) began testing their air for pesticide drift. The science confirmed what these communities already knew: **potato pesticides drift far and wide.**

One or more pesticides were found in 66% of air samples tested (of 340 air samples taken between 2006–2009). Air monitors detected many pesticides, including chlorothalonil, chlorpyrifos, pendimethalin, PCNB, and 2,4-D.

Pesticides used in potato production are known to have harmful effects on human health. Fungicides chlorothalonil and mancozeb are probable carcinogens. The insecticide chlorpyrifos can disrupt nervous system development in children. Metam sodium — a chemical commonly used for soil fumigation in potato fields — is highly volatile and a likely carcinogen.



*"The companies responsible need to stop this chemical trespass into our land, air, water and our lives."*

— Bob Shimek, Mud Lake, Minnesota

## Communities & ecosystems pay the price

Pesticide drift is harming the health and livelihood of people in Minnesota's potato-producing regions. Small farmers have lost livestock that they suspect were poisoned by pesticide drift. Some residents have **developed serious chronic health problems that coincide with pesticide drift incidents.**

The ecological impacts of pesticide-intensive potato production are equally worrisome. Residents report seeing hundreds of dead birds after pesticide applications. Many potato pesticides are harmful to aquatic ecosystems. And in the midst of alarming declines of honey bees and other pollinators, fungicides are known to harm honey bee immune systems.

## Minnesota communities call on McDonald's to make the following changes:

1. Require that its potato suppliers — like RDO — achieve measurable and significant **decrease in use** of health-harming pesticides.
2. Require its potato producers to **release information** on the chemicals they apply to their crops.
3. Fund an independent **human and ecological health study** on the regions impacted by potato production.
4. Ensure that its potato producers adopt environmentally sound, **sustainable agriculture** practices.

## McDonald's has the power to make change

Most acres of potato production in Minnesota are owned or leased by one major potato grower: Ron D. Offutt, or RDO. **RDO is the largest potato producer in the United States**, and also a major supplier of potatoes for McDonald's french fries.

McDonald's buys more than 3.4 billion pounds of U.S. potatoes every year. As the largest potato purchaser in the country, McDonald's decisions drive the potato market.

In 2009, McDonald's made a high-profile pledge to take action on the problem of pesticides on their potatoes. But residents in Minnesota's potato-producing regions have seen no signs of pesticide reduction. And RDO has failed to release information on the chemicals they use or otherwise increase transparency about their practices.

McDonald's has the power to create change in potato-producing regions around the country by making good on their promise to cut down on pesticide use. Now is the time for them to act.

### Health harms of pesticide drift

When pesticides are in the air, we breathe them or absorb them through our skin. Pesticides often have no smell and it can be hard to know when they're present.

Exposure to pesticide drift can cause two types of health problems: (1) immediate poisoning, and (2) chronic health concerns related to ongoing exposure.

Children are more easily harmed by pesticide drift than adults. Even at small doses, pesticides can affect a child's ability to learn and grow, and may cause allergies, breathing problems or other health issues that last for life. In addition to the health effects we understand, there's also a great deal that is unknown: for example, how multiple pesticides interact in our bodies, or how "inert" ingredients impact our health.



*"If people knew how the french fries they eat are contributing to the health and environmental problems of others, I think they would care. McDonald's needs to look at who's growing their potatoes. They talk about sustainability, and I think this is part of that picture. Is it healthy and sustainable for the community that lives nearby?"*

— Carol Ashley, Park Rapids, Minnesota

## Choosing safe taters & healthy communities

Farmers in Minnesota and across the country are growing potatoes sustainably with fewer pesticides. Use of Integrated Pest Management (IPM) techniques in Idaho potato fields increased profits and avoided thousands of pounds of pesticide use. In Europe, IPM techniques have reduced fungicide use by up to 60%. We know RDO can do it too: in fact, RDO grows potatoes organically in other states.

**We urge McDonald's and RDO to rise to this challenge, partner with sustainable agriculture experts and certifiers, and transition to cutting edge, sustainable potato production.**

### Get involved!

1. **Sign the petition** to McDonald's! You'll find it at [www.toxictaters.org](http://www.toxictaters.org).
2. **Spread the word** about the campaign via social media, email, and phone. Share the petition, this fact sheet, and other materials with your networks in Minnesota and around the country.
3. **Invite us to your community.** Would your community organization, church, school, or other group like to host a Toxic Taters educational event? If you're interested in learning more, contact us at [tatercoordinator@gmail.com](mailto:tatercoordinator@gmail.com) or 218.375.2600.
4. **Learn more.** Visit our website to find the latest updates on how you can help press McDonald's to do the right thing.
5. **Call McDonald's at 1-800-244-6227.** Tell them to source potatoes that support healthy communities.

#### Resources Cited

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 Northwest Center for Alternatives to Pesticides. (Spring 2005) Journal of Pesticide Reform: Another Successful Harvest for NCAP's Potato Project.