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A Ban on Child Labor in Tobacco Fields

By THE EDITORIAL BOARD
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Responding to a damning report this year by Human Rights Watch, some cigarette companies and growers have said they will voluntarily restrict child labor in tobacco fields. Though welcome, these steps should be reinforced by new federal rules.

Children as young as 7 are working on tobacco farms in North Carolina, Kentucky, Tennessee and Virginia, often alongside their parents, the report says. This is a perfectly legal practice under federal labor laws and regulations if the parents allow it. Some of the children reported that they suffered from nausea, dizziness and vomiting, all symptoms of nicotine poisoning.

This month, the tobacco companies Altria and R.J. Reynolds said they would start requiring that farmers they buy tobacco from not use workers younger than 16. The Council for Burley Tobacco, which represents growers, adopted a resolution in July stating that it “does not condone the hiring of anyone under the age of 16 for work in tobacco anywhere in the world.” Philip Morris International had previously said it would set the minimum age at 18 for its growers.

Given Big Tobacco’s shameful history of marketing cigarettes to children, it is noteworthy that the industry is willing to do the right thing in the case of child workers. Even so, the federal government should move to prohibit anyone younger

than 18 from working in this industry, given the risk of exposure to nicotine, which can be absorbed through skin contact with tobacco plants and can hurt brain development in young people.

Representative David Cicilline, Democrat of Rhode Island, has introduced a bill that would prohibit children under the age of 18 from working in tobacco fields. But it is unlikely to pass in a Republican-controlled Congress, which is why the Obama administration should act on its own. The Department of Labor has the authority to regulate and restrict child labor.

Three years ago, the department proposed rules that would have prevented children younger than 16 from “participating in the cultivation, harvesting and curing of tobacco.” But officials scrapped that idea after Republican lawmakers and agricultural groups opposed it by falsely arguing that it would keep children from working on family farms.

The government has another chance now that the companies and tobacco growers themselves have acknowledged that age restrictions are necessary.

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