
Pest Control Workers

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Significant Points

- Use of pest control products requires proper safety training.
- Federal and State laws require licensure through training and examination.
- Job prospects should be favorable for qualified applicants because of high turnover in the occupation.

Nature of the Work

Roaches, rats, mice, spiders, termites, fleas, ants, and bees—few people welcome them into their homes or offices. Unwanted creatures that infest households, buildings, or surrounding areas are pests that can pose serious risks to human health and safety. It is a pest control worker's job to eliminate them.

Pest control workers locate, identify, destroy, control, and repel pests. They use their knowledge of pests' biology and habits, along with an arsenal of pest management techniques—applying chemicals, setting traps, operating equipment, and even modifying structures—to alleviate pest problems.

Part of pest control may require pesticide application. Pest control workers use two different types of pesticides—general use and restricted use. General use pesticides are the most widely used and are readily available; in diluted concentrations, they are available to the public. Restricted use pesticides are available only to certified professionals for controlling the most severe infestations. Their registration, labeling, and application are regulated by Federal law, interpreted by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), because of their potential harm to pest control workers, customers, and the environment.

Pesticides are not pest control workers' only tool, however. Pest control workers increasingly use a combination of pest management techniques, known as integrated pest management. One method involves using proper sanitation and creating physical barriers, for pests cannot survive without food and will not infest a building if they cannot enter it. Another method involves using baits, some of which destroy the pests, and others that prevent them from reproducing. Yet another method involves using mechanical devices, such as traps, that remove pests from the immediate environment.

Integrated pest management is becoming popular for several reasons. First, pesticides can pose environmental and health risks. Second, some pests are becoming more resistant to pesticides in certain situations. Finally, an integrated pest management plan is more effective in the long term than use of a pesticide alone.

New technology is being introduced that allows pest control workers to conduct home inspections, mainly of termites, in much less time. The technology works by implanting microchips in baiting stations, which emit signals that can tell pest control workers if there is termite activity at one of the baiting stations. Workers pick up the signals using a device similar to a metal detector and it allows them to assess much more quickly whether termites are present.

Most pest control workers are employed as pest control technicians, applicators, or supervisors. Position titles vary by State,

but the hierarchy—based on training and responsibility required—remains consistent.

Pest control technicians identify potential pest problems, conduct inspections, and design control strategies. They work directly with the customer. Some technicians require a higher level of training depending on their task. If certain products are used, the technician may be required to become a certified *applicator*.

Applicators that specialize in controlling termites are called termite control technicians. They use chemicals and modify structures to eliminate termites and prevent reinfestation. To treat infested areas, termite control technicians drill holes and cut openings into buildings to access infestations, install physical barriers, or bait systems around the structure. Some termite control technicians even repair structural damage caused by termites.

Fumigators are applicators who control pests using poisonous gases called fumigants. Fumigators pretreat infested buildings by examining, measuring, and sealing the buildings. Then, using cylinders, hoses, and valves, they fill structures with the proper amount and concentration of fumigant. They also monitor the premises during treatment for leaking gas. To prevent accidental fumigant exposure, fumigators padlock doors and post warning signs.

Pest control supervisors, also known as operators, direct service technicians and certified applicators. Supervisors are licensed to apply pesticides, but they usually are more involved in running the business. Supervisors are responsible for ensuring that employees obey rules regarding pesticide use, and they must resolve any problems that arise with regulatory officials or customers. Most States require each pest control establishment to have a supervisor; self-employed business owners usually are supervisors.

Working Conditions

Pest control workers must kneel, bend, reach, and crawl to inspect, modify, and treat structures. They work both indoors and out, in all weather conditions. During warm weather, applicators may be uncomfortable wearing the heavy protective gear—such as respirators, gloves, and goggles—required for working with pesticides.



Pest control workers often are called in to eradicate pests in people's homes.

More than a third of all pest control workers work a 40-hour week, but 17% work more hours. Pest control workers often work evenings and weekends, but many work consistent shifts.

There are health risks associated with pesticide use. Various pest control chemicals are toxic and could be harmful if not used properly. Extensive training required for certification and the use of recommended protective equipment minimizes these health risks, resulting in fewer reported cases of lost work. Because pest control workers travel to visit clients, the potential risk of motor vehicle accidents is another occupational hazard.

Employment

Pest control workers held about 62,000 jobs in 2002; 86 percent of workers were employed in the services to buildings and dwellings industry. They are concentrated in States with warmer climates. About 9 percent were self-employed.

Training, Other Qualifications, and Advancement

A high school diploma or equivalent is the minimum qualification for most pest control jobs. Although a college degree is not required, almost half of all pest control workers have either attended college or earned a degree.

Pest control workers must have basic skills in math, chemistry, and writing, either learned at school or through employer. Because of the extensive interaction that pest control workers have with their customers, employers prefer to hire people who have good communication and interpersonal skills. In addition, most pest control companies require their employees to have a good driving record. Pest control workers must be in good health because of the physical demands of the job, and they also must be able to withstand extreme conditions—such as the heat of climbing into an attic in the summertime or the chill of sliding into a crawlspace during winter.

Both Federal and State laws regulate pest control workers. These laws require them to be certified through training and examination, for which most pest control firms help their employees prepare. Workers may receive both formal classroom and on-the-job training, but they also must study on their own. Because the pest control industry is constantly changing, workers must attend continuing education classes to maintain their certification.

Requirements for pest control workers vary by State. Pest control workers usually begin their careers as apprentice technicians. Before performing any pest control services, apprentices must attend general training in pesticide safety and use. In addition, they must train in each pest control category in which they wish to practice. Categories may include general pest control, rodent control, termite control, fumigation, and ornamental and turf control.

Training usually involves spending 10 hours in the classroom and 60 hours on the job for each category. After completing the required training, apprentices can provide supervised pest control services. To be eligible to become applicators, technicians must have a combination of experience and education and pass a test. This requirement is sometimes waived for individuals who have either a college degree in biological sciences or extensive related work experience. To become certified as applicators, technicians must pass an additional set of category exams. Depending on the State, applicators must attend additional classes every 1 to 6 years to be recertified.

Applicators with several years of experience often become supervisors. To qualify as a pest control supervisor, applicators

may have to pass State-administered exams and have experience in the industry, usually a minimum of 2 years.

Job Outlook

Job prospects should be favorable for qualified applicants because many people do not find pest control work appealing and turnover in this occupation is high. Thus, in addition to job openings arising from employment growth, opportunities will result from workers who transfer or leave the occupation and need to be replaced. Employment growth of pest control workers is expected to be as fast as the average for all occupations through 2012. One factor limiting growth in this occupation, however, is the lack of workers willing to go into this field.

Demand for pest control workers is projected to increase for a number of reasons. Growth in the population will generate new residential and commercial buildings that will require inspections by pest control workers. Also, more people are expected to use pest control services as environmental and health concerns, greater numbers of dual-income households, and improvements in the standard of living convince more people to hire professionals rather than attempt pest control work themselves. In addition, tougher regulations limiting pesticide use will demand more complex integrated pest management strategies.

Concerns about the effects of pesticide use in schools have increasingly prompted more school districts to investigate alternative means of pest control, such as integrated pest management. Furthermore, use of some newer materials for insulation around foundations has made many homes more susceptible to pest infestation. Finally, continuing population shifts to the more pest-prone sunbelt States should increase the number of households in need of pest control.

Earnings

Median hourly earnings of full-time wage and salary pest control workers were \$11.90 in 2002. The middle 50 percent earned between \$9.46 and \$14.93. The lowest 10 percent earned less than \$7.53, and the top 10 percent earned over \$18.63. Pest control supervisors usually earn the most and technicians the least, with earnings of certified applicators falling somewhere in between. Some pest control workers earn commissions based on the number of contracts for pest control services they sell. Others may earn bonuses for exceeding performance goals.

Related Occupations

Pesticide handlers also apply pesticides in a safe manner to lawns, trees, and other plants. Pest control workers visit homes and places of business to provide building services. Other workers who provide services to buildings include building cleaning workers; various construction trades workers, including carpenters and electricians; and heating, air-conditioning, and refrigeration mechanics and installers.

Sources of Additional Information

Private employment agencies and State employment services offices have information about available job opportunities for pest control workers.

For information about the training and certification required in your State, contact your local office of the U.S. Department of Agriculture or your State's Environmental Protection Agency (or Conservation), most of which are accessible from the following Web site:

<http://npic.orst.edu/state1.htm>