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In Florida Tomato Fields, a Penny Buys Progress

By STEVEN GREENHOUSE APRIL 24, 2014



Farmworkers in Immokalee, Fla., board an early-morning bus that will take them to the tomato fields. Before the Coalition of Immokalee Workers launched its Fair Food Program, many of the farmworkers would spend hours waiting without pay after getting off the bus. *Credit Richard Perry/The New York Times*

IMMOKALEE, Fla. — Not long ago, Angelina Velasquez trudged to a parking lot at 5 each morning so a crew leader's bus could drop her at the tomato fields by 6. She often waited there, unpaid — while the dew dried — until 10 a.m., when the workers were told to clock in and start picking.

Back then, crew leaders often hector and screamed at the workers, pushing them to fill their 32-pound buckets ever faster in this area known as the nation's tomato capital. For decades, the fields here have had a reputation for horrid conditions. Many migrant workers picked without rest breaks, even in 95-degree heat. Some women complained that crew leaders groped them or demanded sex in exchange for steady jobs.

But those abusive practices have all but disappeared, said Ms. Velasquez, an immigrant from Mexico. She and many labor experts credit a tenacious group of tomato workers, who in recent years forged partnerships with giant restaurant companies like McDonald's and Yum Brands (owner of Taco Bell, Pizza Hut and KFC) to improve conditions in the fields.

By enlisting the might of major restaurant chains and retailers — including Walmart, which signed on this year — the Coalition of Immokalee Workers has pressured growers that produce 90 percent of Florida's tomatoes to increase wages for their 30,000 workers and follow strict standards that mandate rest breaks and forbid sexual harassment and verbal abuse.

The incentive for growers to comply with what's called the Fair Food Program is economically stark: The big companies have pledged to buy only from growers who follow the new standards, paying them an extra penny a pound, which goes to the pickers. The companies have also pledged to drop any suppliers that violate the standards.

So far, the agreements between retailers and growers are limited to Florida's tomato fields, which in itself is no small feat considering that the state produces 90 percent of the country's winter tomatoes.

But gaining the heft and reach of Walmart — which sells 20 percent of the nation's fresh tomatoes year-round — may prove far more influential. To the applause of farmworkers' advocates, the retailer has agreed to extend the program's standards and monitoring to its tomato suppliers in Georgia, South Carolina and Virginia and elsewhere on the Eastern



Workers harvest tomatoes in a field owned by Pacific Tomato Growers, a partner in the Fair Food Program. *Credit Richard Perry/The New York Times*

Seaboard. Walmart officials say they also hope to apply the standards to apple orchards in Michigan and Washington and strawberry fields in many states.

“This is the best workplace-monitoring program I’ve seen in the U.S.,” said Janice R. Fine, a labor relations professor at Rutgers. “It can certainly be a model for agriculture across the U.S. If anybody is going to lead the way and teach people how it’s done, it’s them.”

Since the program’s inception, its system of inspections and decisions issued by a former judge has resulted in suspensions for several growers, including one that failed to adopt a payroll system to ensure pickers were paid for all the time they worked.

But progress is far from complete. Immokalee, 30 miles inland from several wealthy gulf resorts, is a town of taco joints and backyard chicken coops where many farmworkers still live in rotting shacks or dilapidated, rat-infested trailers. A series of prosecutions has highlighted modern-day slavery in the area — one 2008 case involved traffickers convicted of beating workers, stealing their wages and locking them in trucks.

“When I first visited Immokalee, I heard appalling stories of abuse and modern slavery,” said Susan L. Marquis, dean of the Pardee RAND Graduate School, a public policy institution in Santa Monica, Calif. “But now the tomato fields in Immokalee are probably the best working environment in American agriculture. In the past three years, they’ve gone from being the worst to the best.”

Amassing all these company partnerships took time. The workers’ coalition organized a four-year boycott of Taco Bell to get its parent company, Yum Brands, to agree in 2005 to pay an extra penny a pound for tomatoes, helping increase workers’ wages. In 2007 the coalition sponsored a march to Burger King’s headquarters in Miami, pushing that company to join the effort. Whole Foods, Trader Joe’s, Chipotle and Subway have also signed on.

Perhaps the coalition's biggest success is luring Walmart, which joined the program in January without a fight. Walmart officials said they were looking for ethically sourced produce as well as a steady supply of tomatoes. The giant company's decision coincides with its major inroads into organic foods and fresh fruits and vegetables.



The program's standards have raised pay and mandated sessions on safety and workers' rights. *Credit Richard Perry/The New York Times*

"We try to sell safe, affordable, sustainable sources of food — that's the only way we will be able to grow the way we want in the future," said Jack L. Sinclair, executive vice president of Walmart's grocery division. "These guys have a pretty good set of standards in place that we think will allow our growers to get a consistent level of labor." He told of Arizona growers whose tomatoes had rotted in the fields because of a lack of pickers.

The Fair Food Program's standards go far beyond what state or federal law requires, mandating shade tents so that workers who request a rest break can escape the hot Florida sun. Remedying a practice that Ms. Velasquez abhorred, growers must clock in workers as soon as they are bused to the fields.

Every farm must have a health and safety committee with workers' representatives, and there is a 24-hour hotline that workers can call, with a Spanish-speaking investigator.

Under the program, tomato pickers may receive an extra \$60 to \$80 a week because of the penny-a-pound premium. That means a 20 to 35 percent weekly pay increase for these workers, who average about \$8.75 an hour. The extra penny a pound means that participating companies together pay an additional \$4 million a year for tomatoes.

"We see ourselves as a standard-setting organization," said Greg Asbed, co-founder of the Coalition of Immokalee Workers.

Established in 1993, the coalition was one of the nation's first worker centers dedicated to aiding migrants. It has since grown steadily, to 4,500 members, and its tactics have become more

sophisticated. Last spring, a group of 100 workers and their supporters marched 200 miles from Immokalee to Lakeland, Fla., to press Publix Super Markets to join the program. Publix said it already used growers that adhered to high standards.

Mr. Asbed attributes the program's success to getting giant corporations like Walmart to join.

"We've harnessed their market power to eliminate worker abuses," he said. "There has to be real and believable market consequences for growers that refuse to comply."

In late 2007, after McDonald's signed on, the Florida Tomato Growers Exchange, an industry association, sought to scuttle the coalition's efforts. It threatened growers with \$100,000 fines if they cooperated with the coalition, stalling its efforts.

But the logjam was broken in 2010 when Pacific Tomato Growers — one of the nation's biggest producers, with large operations in Florida — joined. Weeks later, Lipman, the nation's largest tomato grower, also signed on, and eventually the Tomato Growers Exchange did, too.

Beau McHan, Pacific's harvest manager, said, "We're trying to run a business and make a profit, yet everyone wants to know they're changing the world for the better."

Joining, he acknowledged, has cost Pacific hundreds of thousands of dollars — \$5,000 a year for shade tents and \$50,000 for an improved drinking-water system as well as the money to pay workers for waiting time that was once off the clock. A former New York State judge, Laura Safer Espinoza, oversees the inspection apparatus, which interviews thousands of workers, audits payrolls and conducts in-depth interviews with farm managers. There are lengthy trainings for crew leaders, and six of them were fired after her team investigated allegations of verbal abuse and sexual harassment.

"Supervisors have gotten the message, and we're seeing far fewer allegations of harassment than three years ago," she said.

Now that the three-year-old program has stopped much of the abuse and harassment, participants are planning to give tomatoes produced under its watch a "Fair Food" label that could reassure — and attract — shoppers who want ethically sourced produce.