

Op-Ed Harvesting solutions: How to address the plight of farmworkers in Mexico

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Last month, the Los Angeles Times published "Product of Mexico," a four-part series on the abuse of workers on Mexican megafarms that export fruits and vegetables to the United States. The articles and photographs documented dangerous and squalid housing, children as young as 6 working in the fields and laborers denied wages and trapped in debt peonage at company-owned stores.

Since the articles ran, two trade groups — the Confederation of Agribusiness Assns. in the state of Sinaloa and the Fresh Produce Assn. of the Americas in Arizona — have launched a joint social-responsibility initiative. The Opinion page solicited additional ideas on what needs to be done, and by whom, to remedy the harsh conditions.

Pressure retailers and fast-food chains

By Don Villarejo

Can the American consumer do anything about the systematic exploitation of low-paid farm laborers in Mexico that subsidizes our low food prices?

Pressure on American food companies, such as Safeway, Subway and Walmart, can work. In fact, 11 multibillion-dollar food buyers so far have agreed to pay an additional 1 cent per pound for all tomatoes from Florida under an agreement with the Coalition of Immokalee Workers, an advocacy group of Florida farm laborers and community supporters. A penny per pound may not sound like much — U.S. average tomato prices were \$0.91 to \$2.42 per pound last month — but the increase in worker earnings can be 15% or more.

Even with consumer support, progress can be slow. I remember encountering a small group picketing a Taco Bell in Tucson 12 years ago. I stopped to ask about their concerns and learned they were demanding the company pay an extra cent per pound to tomato pickers — in Florida! This group, all volunteers, had been picketing once a week for months because they felt that fairness in the nation's food system was important. Ultimately they prevailed.

Each of us can protest in our own way to improve the lives of the workers whose stories we read in "Product of Mexico." We can communicate our outrage directly to these companies, or through social media, and urge our friends and family members to do likewise.

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