Photo of the Day: Wal-Mart Joins Initiative on Farmworker Pay

MIKE SCHNEIDER and WILFREDO LEE, Associated Press

(AP) — Farmworker at Lipman Produce load tomatoes on a truck from a second harvest of tomato plants, Thursday, Jan. 16, 2014 in Naples, Fla.

Wal-Mart Stores Inc. on Thursday joined an initiative that will require its Florida tomato suppliers to increase farmworker pay and protect workers from forced labor and sexual assault, among other things. The nation's largest retailer became the most influential corporation to join the initiative promoted by a coalition of farmworker activists based in southwest Florida. Farmworkers with the Coalition of Immokalee Workers said they welcomed Wal-Mart to its Fair Food Program since no other company has the market strength and consumer reach it has when it comes to selling produce. Also at the table, John Amaya, vice president, global food and consumable sourcing at Wal-Mart, and Gerardo Reys-Chavez, right, with the CIW. **(AP Photo/Wilfredo Lee)**

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"Through this collaboration, not only will thousands of hard-working farmworkers see concrete improvements to their lives, but millions of consumers will learn about the Fair Food Program and of a better way to buy fruits and vegetables grown and harvested here in the U.S," said Cruz Salacio, a spokesman for the Coalition of Immokalee Workers.

The Bentonville, Ark.-based retailer's participation in the Fair Food Program is the most visible catch for the coalition, whose activists have been asking corporate grocery chains and restaurants to put pressure on growers to improve farmworker conditions for the past decade. Participants now include McDonalds, Burger King, Subway, Chipotle, Whole Foods Market, Trader Joe's and Yum Brands — the company whose restaurant chains include Taco Bell, Kentucky Fried Chicken and Pizza Hut.

"The companywide commitment from Wal-Mart on social issues is the reason why we are doing this, and we are committed to the Fair Food Program," said Tom Leech, a Wal-Mart senior vice president.

He attended the ceremony on a farm near Naples, Fla. where the announcement was made.

Florida tomato suppliers in the Fair Food Program pass on to their buyers a penny-per-pound of tomatoes pay increase for farmworkers. They also must have zero tolerance for forced labor and sexual assault and put in place a mechanism for resolving labor disputes between growers and farmworkers. The program also requires growers to allow farmworkers to form health and safety committees on each farm.

Growers in compliance earn a "Participating Grower" designation, and if they lose the designation through violations, they won't be able to sell their tomatoes to the participating buyers, such as Wal-Mart, according to the coalition.

"This signifies a tremendous change," Lucas Benitez, a coalition leader, said of Wal-Mart's participation.

Farmworkers with the Coalition of Immokalee Workers said the majority of Wal-Mart's Florida tomato suppliers already participate in the Fair Food Program. But they said they expect the retailer expands the Fair Food Program to other crops in

its produce supply chain and to tomatoes grown outside of Florida.

Wal-Mart's sizable influence with suppliers — what some dub "the Wal-Mart" effect — could make that happen, as well as help make the standards pushed for by the coalition industry standards, said Michael Hicks, an economics professor at Ball State University whose research has focused on Wal-Mart.

"When a buyer out of Bentonville says, 'This is what I want out of tomatoes,' that influences all of the tomato market," Hicks said. "It may not change everything, but it will influence anybody who wants to sell tomatoes through Wal-Mart."

The coalition began fighting to increase the wages of tomato pickers back in the 1990s, attempting strikes with little success early on. Then the group turned to the major food chains that bought the tomatoes, leading to a nationwide boycott of Taco Bell that culminated in a 2005 agreement with the fast-food chain.

More deals with tomato buyers soon followed, but each time the growers balked. The growers threatened to fine any members who worked with the coalition and instead created their own safety and worker protection plan.

Finally, in 2010, the Florida Tomato Growers Exchange agreed to boost wages and working conditions for farmworkers with measures outlined in the Fair Food Program.

Any extra cost likely will be shared by shippers, Wal-Mart and consumers, Hicks said.

"My guess is it's not a very big cost increase," he said.

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Lee reported from Naples. Schneider reported from Orlando.

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