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AGRICULTURE

Coalition seeks to protect rights of tomato workers

The Alliance for Fair Food will be created to get retail food corporations to buy from sellers that ensure laborers' wages and employment rights.

By Laura Wides-Munos

Associated Press

MIAMI - Farmworker advocates are calling on the U.S. fast-food industry to do more to ensure fair treatment for thousands of agricultural workers who pick tomatoes.

The Southeastern Florida-based Coalition of Immokalee Workers planned to announce Wednesday the creation of the Alliance for Fair Food. The national alliance will work to get major retail food corporations to buy from sellers that ensure laborers' wages and employment rights.

The move comes one year after the coalition won an unprecedented commitment from Taco Bell's parent company Yum! Brands to pay more for its tomatoes -- an increase that has been passed on to the workers.

Alliance members include the RFK Memorial Center for Human Rights, the AFL-CIO, the Presbyterian Church, Interfaith Action and the Student Farmworker Alliance.

"The abuse of farmworkers' fundamental human rights is a shameful part of this country's history," said Coalition co-founder Lucas Benitez. "The whole industry is responsible, not just Taco Bell, and now it's time for the entire industry to step up and make a change as Taco Bell has done to improve the quality of life for workers."

A message left for the National Restaurant Association was not immediately returned Tuesday.

Farmworkers picking tomatoes from most of Florida suppliers earn about 40 cents to 45 cents for every 32 pound bucket, nearly the same amount they earned 30 years ago. Those picking tomatoes sold to Taco Bell now earn at least \$10 more per week, according to the Coalition.

Farmworkers, many of whom are illegal immigrants, receive no overtime, health insurance, sick leave or other benefits. They must be constantly on call for growers, even on days when there is no work, making it hard to seek more work to make ends meet.

Florida pickers provide about 90 percent of the nation's domestic fresh winter tomatoes, according to growers.