

CIW debuts Fair Food label nationwide

By Amy Bennett Williams, awilliams@news-press.com

October 24, 2014



The first-ever Fair Food label went national Friday marking the latest milestone in the Coalition of Immokalee Workers' two-decade-long journey to improve the lives of Florida farmworkers.

Similar to the "cruelty-free" or "fair trade" labels on other products, the logo brands tomatoes harvested by workers paid a premium and guaranteed human rights in the field.

"We have waited nearly five years before revealing this label to the world today," said the coalition's Cruz in a statement. "Over those years, we have been doing the hard, day-by-day work of building the Fair Food Program in Florida's fields — educating workers about their rights, investigating complaints, and

identifying and eliminating bad actors and bad practices — so that today we can stand behind the fair conditions and effective monitoring process that this label represents."

The label originated with the Coalition of Immokalee Workers' Campaign for Fair Food, which began in a church meeting room when a handful of Immokalee tomato pickers, historically among the nation's lowest-paid workers, began discussing how to improve their lot. They aimed to raise wages by a penny per pound and clean up labor conditions in the fields, which were plagued by wage theft, sexual harassment and modern-day slavery.

Twenty-one years later, Wal-Mart, Burger King, McDonald's and Yum Brands which includes Taco Bell, along with many of the world's largest food service corporations, are now paying the bonus. Thanks to the extra penny, workers who once made 50 cents for every 32-pound bucket have seen that rise to 82 cents, which can boost annual earnings from around \$10,000 to more than \$16,000. Other innovations include a cooperative complaint resolution system, health and safety programs, and worker-to-worker education.

Whole Foods stores and Compass Brands, an institutional food provider, will be the first program members to display the label, which will be available to all participating companies.

It's the latest accomplishment in what's been an extraordinary year for the grassroots nonprofit.

In January, the biggest retailer on the planet, Wal-Mart, joined the Fair Food Program. Not only did it sign on without any marches, protests or pickets, it agreed to expand the program to produce beyond tomatoes and the scope beyond Florida. Wal-Mart also promised longer-term purchase commitments as a reward for suppliers "whose operations best reflect the principles of the Fair Food Program."

In April, the documentary "Food Chains," about the group, sold out its first U.S. screening at New York's Tribeca Film Festival, the same week the coalition's work was front-page news in The New York Times.



CIW Co-founders Greg Asbed and Lucas Benitez receive Clinton Global Citizen Award

In July, the coalition received a Freedom medal from the Roosevelt Institute, joining a list of luminaries that includes Nelson Mandela, the Dalai Lama, Tom Brokaw and U.S. Presidents Harry Truman, John F. Kennedy, Jimmy Carter and Bill Clinton.

Last month, Clinton gave the group the Clinton Global Citizen Award, calling its work "the most astonishing thing politically happening in the world we're living in today."

And next month, "Food Chains," produced by actress and activist Eva Longoria, will be released to theaters nationally, including the Prado Stadium 12 in Bonita Springs.

Meanwhile, the coalition continues its high-profile campaign to try to persuade other companies to sign onto the Fair Food program, including Publix, which has refused to join.

"Our position has not changed," wrote spokesman Brian West in an email. "We are aware that the label was released (but) at this point, we have not spoken with any of our suppliers that may support the effort."