



Kerry Champion was jobless before joining a crew of probationers to work a field outside Leslie, Ga.

Erik German/The Daily

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exclusive

# Picking a fight

Latinos avoid Ga. over immigration law, leaving farms without labor

By Erik German





LESLIE, Ga. — In America’s ongoing battle over illegal immigration, there are few battle lines hotter than a cucumber field in a secluded corner of rural Georgia.

“Where are these cucumbers coming from!” Benito Mendez, 50, shouted at a row of stooped men. The sun-beaten crew boss angrily held up one of the offending vegetables, a yellowing specimen as thick as a baseball bat.

“These are no good!” Mendez said.

the time I’d be out of business.”

Until this season, thousands of Latino migrants descended on Georgia annually to hand-pick the cucumbers, cantaloupe and other labor-intensive crops that are a linchpin of the state’s \$1.1 billion agriculture industry.

But farmers and crew bosses say many migrants are skipping Georgia this season, frightened off by a tough new anti-immigration law similar to those passed in



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Juan Jarquim, left, Jose Herrera, and Benito Mendez, say migrants are afraid of the immigration law.

“They’re already old!”

His crew of 14 pickers, sluggish and suffering in the 100-degree heat, paid little heed. These weren’t the seasoned Latino migrants Mendez usually employs, this was a stopgap crew — probationers and ex-convicts, mostly — few of whom had ever picked a vegetable before.

“I’m not discriminating against anybody,” Mendez said, frowning at the sweating men. “But if I used these guys all

Arizona and Alabama. Backers of the Georgia bill insist it will protect taxpayers from the costs undocumented immigrants and their children incur in schools, hospitals and courts. But farmers and their employees say lawmakers have unfairly targeted Latinos and suddenly choked off labor vital to the state’s biggest industry.

Yesterday, a federal judge blocked parts of Georgia’s law from taking effect until a legal challenge is resolved.





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Johnny Profit counts plastic chips he's received for picking cucumbers near Leslie, Ga. Each chip will net him 50 cents.

Judge Thomas Thrash granted a request to block parts of the law that penalize people who knowingly and willingly transport or harbor illegal immigrants while committing another crime. He also blocked provisions that authorize officers to verify the immigration status of someone who can't provide proper identification.

"This is a 40-year-old situation and they're trying to change it in 30 days," said Dick Minor, a farmer who says about a

third of his produce crop withered in the field because he lacked the crews to get it picked. "We just don't have the labor and it's gonna get worse."

Gov. Nathan Deal, who signed the bill last month, has consistently defended the law, maintaining the economic benefits outweigh the costs and arguing that states must step in where the federal government has not. "We will continue to have a broken system until we have a federal solution," Deal said in a statement. "In the meantime, states must act to defend their taxpayers."

Among other provisions, Georgia's law had required employers to use the federal E-verify program to check the immigration status of all prospective hires. It also authorizes police to check for citizenship during traffic stops and makes it a felony to hire undocumented immigrants, house them, or transport them in a car. Civil-rights groups have challenged the statute as unconstitutional.

Precisely how many migrants have bypassed the state is hard to know. But, in a survey earlier this month, Georgia's Agriculture Department reported the state's farmers have at least 11,000 job openings they can't fill. While legal challenges sank Arizona's anti-immigration bill before it had much effect, it appears that Georgia's early harvest and nervous, transient work force has offered a unique window on what happens to an economy when migrants flee.

And those in the vegetable fields say the view isn't rosy. To bridge the labor gap, Deal has proposed giving picking jobs to the approximately 2,000 people in southwest Georgia who are unemployed





and on probation. In Dick Minor's cucumber field last week, those who accepted the offer tended to be men with few other options, clinging to the bottom rung of America's economic ladder after runs of bad decisions and worse luck. And few said they were in shape to keep up with the work for long.

"I hate it," said Jermond Powell, 33, as he squinted under a hot sun. Powell, who's on probation for missed child support payments, said he'd lost his truck driver's license and his job. "I feel like it's a military camp or something here," he said. "I've seen guys fall down, throw up, get nosebleeds..."

A few rows over, a lean, unemployed cook named Johnny Profit, 40, tried to stay upbeat. "You can never get used to the heat, but you can adjust to it," he said,

tossing cucumbers into his bucket.

Profit said he'd been busted for cocaine possession, dealing, he said, to buy medicine for his wife. "She has M.S. and I had to hustle it up," he said.

Several hours into his first day, Profit said he wasn't sure how long he'd last, but he'd give his best. "We've got three daughters, and that was my motivation to come out here," he said. "But you stand around long enough, you might see my head hit the ground."

A two-decade veteran of the picking trade, Mendez kept frowning at the stooped figures. The crew boss said he didn't fault the men for trying. He faulted them for picking bad vegetables, and for being slow.

"I got another crew, Latinos, picking on the other side of the farm and you see the





difference,” Mendez said, pointing at the truck being loaded with cucumbers. “In a day, these guys pick one truck load. The Latinos pick six loads.”

Coverage of Georgia’s new law has been wall-to-wall on local Spanish-language news, Mendez and other bosses said. They simply haven’t been able to persuade their normal crews to work.

“This year was the worst,” said Manuel Delarosa, 66, another leader running a skeleton crew on Minor’s farm. “My people just don’t want to come to the state of Georgia.”

Among the migrants who’ve decided to come, the anxiety is unmistakable. Workers say they’re keeping the lowest profile they can, making only essential trips and driving as little as possible. “I just go from work to the house, house to work,” said

Heraclio Martinez, 39.

Oscar Palacios, 17, said he’s picked in Georgia with his family for the last five years. They were worried about coming, he said, but they have no choice. “We have to make a living,” he said. “We left it up to God.”

In a field outside the town of Tifton, Jose Cruz, a muscular 22-year-old hefting cantaloupes alongside his mother and father, said, “everyone’s constantly looking over their shoulder, making sure there’s no immigration coming to get them.”

“I’m all right,” Cruz said, explaining that unlike his folks, he was born in the United States. Then, nodding at his parents, he added, “It’s them I’m worried about.”

The man whose produce Cruz is harvesting, a reserved, silver-haired farmer



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A member of a crew hired to fill in for Latino workers hoists a bucket.





named Phillip Grimes, said it's not just the pickers whom the law will put out of work. After they're plucked from the fields, cantaloupes are trucked to Grimes' 15,000-square-foot packing facility where several dozen employees wash the melons in chlorinated water and stack them into boxes sorted by size.

"I've got 40 people that're legal here, and they wouldn't have a job either," Grimes said. "If we don't have a work force for next year, I won't grow produce."

Plowing under the melon fields to grow peanuts or cotton would cut his profits in half, he said, but it'd be simple enough. "Easy, as a matter of fact," Grimes said. "If we just grew row crops I wouldn't need but four people instead of 120."

**"This is a 40-year-old situation and they're trying to change it in 30 days." – Dick Minor, farmer**

Along with the lost revenue and jobs, farmers in the region said there's also something less tangible at stake. William Brown, freckled and still brawny at 71, has been farming the gently rolling fields outside the town of Montezuma for four decades. He grows cotton, peanuts, corn, squash among other things. But he's got a soft spot for his groves of Georgia peaches, 200 acres bearing fruit with 100 more on the way. He sells them from a farm stand in boxes whose golden aroma hits the nose from three feet away.

"I don't know who I can get to pick them," Brown said. The labor shortage has already caused him to renege on a con-



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tract to deliver a load of squash this season. If he can't find the hands he needs by next year, Brown said he'll be forced to give up on all his labor-intensive crops, plow under the vegetable fields, bulldoze the peach trees, "and pile 'em up, burn 'em."

"I don't get near the thrill out of planting cotton as I do looking at peaches," he said. "I'd hate like the dickens to see pretty trees like these go." ■