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Specter of slavery persists in fields

Tomato pickers insist practice is rampant

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The new home of The Coalition of Immokalee Workers Community Center is at 110 S. Second St. in Immokalee. (KINFAY MOROTI/news-press.com)

In recent years, The Coalition of Immokalee Workers has made headlines — as recently as last week — by convincing fast-food restaurants to increase pay for Florida tomato pickers.

Yet along with these efforts, the coalition pursues another part of its mission: ending slavery. This ancient scourge remains a modern problem, members say, pointing to the upcoming sentencing of four Navarrete family members who pleaded guilty in one of Southwest Florida's "biggest, ugliest slavery cases ever," according to Chief Assistant U.S. Attorney Doug Molloy.

At the same time, the leader of the state's largest tomato industry group denies knowledge of slavery in U.S. Senate hearings this spring and has reiterated those denials to The News-Press.

In his Senate testimony, Reggie Brown, executive vice president of the Florida Tomato Growers Exchange, to which 90 percent of tomato growers belong, called charges growers have enslaved workers "false and defamatory." "Let me state unequivocally that Florida's tomato growers abhor and condemn slavery," Brown told the senators.

On Friday, four members of Immokalee's Navarrete family — those who pleaded guilty to the most serious charges - will learn their fate in federal court. The bosses, brothers Cesar and Geovanni Navarrete, will likely serve at least 12 years and face fines between \$750,000 and \$1 million each. They also will forfeit their house and \$13,764 in cash found inside it when they were arrested.

Two others, who pleaded guilty to lesser offenses, were sentenced earlier this year. According to the federal case, from 2005 to 2007, the family held 12 men from Mexico and Guatemala on their property. (The government is keeping the victims' identities confidential; at sentencing, though, they'll have the chance to tell the court what happened and how it affected them.)

According to the plea allocution, the Navarretes didn't smuggle the men from their home countries, but once the men signed on, Navarrete family members confiscated their identification papers and gave them fake IDs. At night, they locked them in shacks and box trucks, where they were forced to urinate and defecate in corners. Captives were charged for food and showers with a garden hose. The Navarretes tied, chained and beat them if they tried to leave. Sometimes they made their captives fight. Although they advanced the workers "credit" for day-to-day necessities, they didn't pay them for their work.

That work, defendants testified, was harvesting tomatoes.

Just who paid the slave crew leaders was a point U.S. Magistrate Judge Douglas Frazier was careful to clarify at the September plea hearing.

"The money came from the growers?" Frazier asked Cesar Navarrete, 27. "Is that what you're telling me? For your work and the work of your crew?" he asked.

It did, Cesar Navarrete said, nodding.

The judge asked Cesar's brother, Geovanni, 22, the same: "You're saying all the money came from the growers?"

"Yeah," said Cesar. "It came from the growers."

"Because of work your workers had done?"



Twisted barbed wire and chain-link fence surround a home and property at 209 S. Seventh St. in Immokalee. A family was charged with harboring more than 12 slaves on the property. (andrew west/the news-press)

"Yes."

The defendants chose to plead guilty because "in federal court, if you go to trial and lose, the sentences are extremely severe," said Geovanni Navarrete's attorney, Joseph Viacava, at the hearing. "We were happy to negotiate a resolution that caps our client's liability and puts him in a favorable position come sentencing."

In a plea agreement, Molloy said, defendants are given credit for taking responsibility for their crimes.

"But remember, in federal cases, there's no parole," he said. "They're going to do all their time."

Practices prohibited

There are between 10,000 and 30,000 migrant farmworkers in Florida, according to government estimates. Florida supplies 90 percent of all winter tomatoes and Southwest Florida accounts for a third of the state's crop - worth about \$619 million last year, said Brown.

Three years ago, Brown said, the industry (along with McDonald's) set up a third-party audit process to review grower practices.

"(The) code prohibits the practices that were practiced by the Navarretes," Brown wrote in an e-mail to The News-Press.

That may be, said John Bowe, author of the book "Nobodies: Modern American Slave Labor and the Dark Side of the New Global Economy," but they need to acknowledge their responsibility. "At this point, (the FTGE) is like a drunk out in the middle of the street screaming out to everyone that there is no problem," Bowe said. "It's just so obvious that there is a problem - you can't say the same thing over and over again in the face of this reality."

Molloy agrees. Southwest Florida's chief U.S. attorney for the past 17 years, he's become one of the Justice Department's leading experts on slavery. A much-in-demand speaker, he's educated individuals and law enforcement in places ranging from Brazil to the Czech Republic.

"It doesn't help when people deny that it exists," Molloy said. "That's like throwing gasoline on the fire."

After every conviction, Molloy said, several new reports of slavery reach his office.

That's why it's dangerous to say it doesn't happen, Molloy said. "It does ... because it's so profitable. It's also soulless."

Under current law, growers can use crews provided by independent labor contractors, who must hold state licenses (although the Navarretes did not).

That allows growers to sidestep responsibility for abuses, said U.S. Sen. Bernie Sanders, I-Vt., who sponsored the hearings. He intends to use his position on the Health, Education, Labor and Pension Committee to change that.

"We need to end the loophole in current law that lets growers avoid responsibility for what happens in their fields - fields where workers are being enslaved," Sanders said.

Coalition member Laura Germino asked, "What more are (the growers) waiting for? ... Do we need, say, dozens of workers in chains before the growers' association steps up to do the right thing? Instead, we have obfuscation and denial - same as it ever was. And if the growers can't or won't police themselves, where are the leaders of this state?"

The News-Press made several requests to speak with Florida Gov. Charlie Crist (who's never visited Immokalee on state business or agreed to the coalition's requests to meet about slavery). Press secretary Sterling Ivey declined, suggesting a call to Terence McElroy, spokesman for the state's Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services, which licenses farm labor contractors.

McElroy said the state has a hot line for workers to report labor abuse: 800-633-3572.

"Of course, I say any instance is too many, and any legitimate grower certainly does not engage in that activity (slavery) but you're talking about maybe a case a year," McElroy said.

That attitude galls Bowe. "People will say, 'Golly, we only had two or three slavery cases last year - that's not so bad, is it?' Well, that's like saying I only have three HIV viruses in my body. Guess what? It's a problem. It might not seem like a big deal, but try ignoring it, try waiting a while. Eventually, you can't."