

Conditions in North Carolina Tobacco Fields

“I came here from San Antonio, after being told that there was work in NC. I didn’t know anyone or have any family or friends but I found work in tobacco, where we spent nine or ten hours a day bent over harvesting the leaves at the bottom of the plant. It gets really hot and we sweat a lot, making it very uncomfortable. I had cramps and pains all over my body. The smell of tobacco made me nauseous and dizzy, but I had to keep working. I felt too sick and had to stop when it got really bad. The crew leader told me he was going to get a shovel and bury me right there. “

“We lived 20-25 people to a house, with only a few stoves. Some had to wait until midnight to eat dinner because they couldn’t make their dinner or food for the next day. We had to wake up at 5am to work, we got very little sleep. Eating was difficult because we had to bring our food into the field. It was too far from the house to go back. Without enough water or towels in the fields we had to eat with dirty hands. The tar from the tobacco builds up on your hands and they are black.”

“The tractor would pass and spray the plants and we would be right behind it harvesting the leaves. The liquid got all over our hands and arms.”



-Heriberto, Eastern NC

“I have had a number of contractors just refuse to pay me. When you don’t have anyone to go to, there is nothing you can do. You just have to take it and go work for someone else if you can. My cousin complained once and the crew leader showed him his gun. We didn’t have papers so we were afraid to go to the police and just left.”

-Edgar, Eastern NC



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“We worked for this crew leader in Grantham, NC. I will never go work there again. He would not let anyone take breaks and would always be yelling to work faster. Everyone needs to work really fast when we are being paid by contract, but when we are being paid by the hour all of the extra money we make while we break our backs goes to the contractor. It is really hard to go so fast in the hot sun, when the sickness from the tobacco begins to effect us and especially without breaks for water and rest. When we would ask for water and he would tell us to bring our own. Without ice, the water is almost boiling in the sun. It does not help your thirst.”

“Many crew leaders do not provide water. Maybe if there were more inspectors things would improve but up until now, these things still happen a lot.”

“I remember when two friends did not get paid by the crew leader. Their names were Sonya and Alex. We went to the crew leaders house to ask for our money. He said the grower didn't pay him so he had no money to pay us. We didn't feel we could say anything because they threaten us with calling the police or immigration.

-Joel, Seven Springs, NC

“Things are bad. The work is hard and the pay is little. But that is just the way it is. We have to eat. Our kids have to eat.”

-Mairo, Dudley, NC

