

Some Ala. farmers cut back crops, citing crackdown

By JAY REEVES, Associated Press

ONEONTA, Ala. (AP) — Some Alabama farmers say they are planting less produce rather than risk having tomatoes and other crops rot in the fields a second straight year because of labor shortages linked to the state's crackdown on illegal immigration.

Keith Dickie said he and other growers in the heart of Alabama's tomato country didn't have any choice but to reduce acreage amid fears there won't be enough workers to pick the delicate fruit.

Some farmers lacked enough hands to harvest crops because immigrants fled the state after Gov. Robert Bentley signed the immigration law last fall, and some told The Associated Press they fear the same thing could happen this year.

"There's too much uncertainty," said Dickie, who farms with his brother on a ridge called Straight Mountain, about 40 miles northeast of Birmingham.

On nearby Chandler Mountain, another prime farming area, Jimmy Miller said he cut back on produce because of possible labor shortages and instead planted more cotton and peanuts, which can both be harvested by big machines called combines that require minimal labor.

It's unclear how many farmers are changing their planting patterns this year because of the law and whether consumers might see food shortages on the produce aisle at supermarkets. Some growers say they aren't making any changes from years past, and neither the Alabama Department of Agriculture and Industries nor the Alabama Farmers Federation has compiled statistics yet for the year.

But Mac Higginbotham, an expert with the federation, said this growing season is important for the state's farmers, about 1,100 of whom grow labor-intensive produce.

"I think this year will really show how much of a labor shortage is actually out there and it will reflect in the produce availability (and) prices eventually," he said.

State agriculture officials said the law has created chronic labor shortages since it was passed last year by the Republican-controlled Legislature, where sponsors said they wanted to drive illegal immigrants from the state by making it difficult for them to live in Alabama.

Aside from requiring all employers to register with a federal citizenship-verification system called E-Verify, the law barred residents from conducting basic business transactions if they lacked citizenship papers and required schools to check the citizenship status of new students.

Federal courts have blocked parts of the law in response to lawsuits by the Obama administration and others, prompting Bentley and GOP leaders to support what they say are tweaks to the law. The Legislature has blocked efforts to repeal the law, with Republican backers saying they want

Alabama to still have the nation's toughest law on illegal immigration once the legislative session ends in a few weeks.

Georgia has a similar law on the books, and farmers there have had similar concerns about finding a work force to pick crops like Vidalia onions. Some farmers there have also said they were scaling back their acreage, fearing they wouldn't find the workers to pick the crops.

While some immigrants who left the state last fall in fear of the law have since returned, farmers said they still don't know whether there will be enough workers to harvest crops. A major squash producer in north Alabama is cutting back production and moving some crops to Tennessee because of uncertainty over the law, said John Aplin, a fourth-generation farmer who serves on the state board that oversees farmer markets statewide.

Aplin, who grows tomatoes and about 200 other varieties of produce on 200 acres near the Florida line, said he planted his regular crops and is hoping he can get them out of the fields when his first large tomato harvest begins later this month. Like other farmers, Aplin said he has had little luck finding Alabama natives who could or would perform the grueling field work that Hispanic immigrants have done for years.

"They'll work a morning and come up at lunchtime and say, 'I'm done,'" said Aplin.

Dickie, whose K&D Farms raises tomatoes on about 40 acres of rolling farmland, is eliminating one entire field from production this year in hope of having enough workers to harvest the rest. Sitting on a tractor during a break, he said he hopes the cutback is large enough to compensate for a second year of labor shortages.

"If it's not I guess we'll sell out and find something else to do," he said.