

CHERITON, Va. — Each spring, a thousand or more Mexican tomato pickers descend on Virginia's Eastern Shore to toil in the fields of Lipman Family Farms, enduring long hours stooped over to pluck the plump fruit and then hoisting it on their shoulders onto a waiting truck. An adept worker will fill a 32-pound bucket every two and a half minutes, earning 65 cents for each one.

The region is considered the toughest on the tomato circuit: Heavy rain brings the harvest to a halt for days at a time and can cut into production, a source of anxiety for people eager to maximize their earnings in the United States. The muck ruins shoes and turns moist feet into hamburger...

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