Local Immigrant Farmer Education in Hawaii

An increasing number of socially disadvantaged farmers are entering Hawaii’s agriculture industry with little to no experience in commercial agriculture. They operate in rural and remote areas of Hawaii. They cultivate diverse and culturally important crops primarily for local food production. Ongoing educational support from the University of Hawaii at Manoa, College of Tropical Agriculture and Human Resources (UH CTAHR), Cooperative Extension Service is essential for the sustainability of these under represented, developing agricultural areas due to their small acreage, remote locations, lack of access to farm resources, and limited English literacy.

This change in Hawaii’s agriculture industry prompted a need for an educational program involving responsible and sustainable farming, business and risk management, and environmental protection stewardship. UH CTAHR developed a grassroots oriented program, Local and Immigrant Farmer Education Program (LIFE) in under serviced farming communities to assist these producers in dealing with the many facets of crop production. The LIFE program is a team of Cooperative Extension Service agents and specialists with an established network of government and industry partners.

LIFE has established a solid reputation for delivering timely, useful, hands-on, quality extension education to Hawaii’s underserved and socially disadvantaged producers. These producers include limited resource growers, women, native Hawaiians, and farm workers. The LIFE Program is using the traditional extension model of “taking the university out to the people.” The goal of the LIFE program is to: 1) increase the viability and sustainability of commercial farms in Hawaii, 2) integrate more farmers into mainstream agriculture, and 3) help drive Hawaii’s diversified industry forward.

Committed to the mission of the land grant university, LIFE strives to provide quality educational programs to ensure farmers in the targeted areas are sufficiently informed, have access to existing and emerging research-based management tools, have ample opportunities to advance their knowledgebase and competencies so they can correctly choose and utilize specific technology and practices best suited to meet their diverse educational needs.

LIFE’s extension educational programs are responsive to their clientele's identified, immediate and long-term educational needs. A needs assessment study was utilized to identify the present and future needs of LIFE’s client base. LIFE continues to discover new ways in attracting, promoting, and educating growers to attend extension.
educational events; advance timeliness and delivery of relevant, research-based information; and enhance clients’ relationships and satisfaction with UH CTAHR and other government programs through identification of high priority areas.

The top four areas of priority for statewide LIFE cooperators were: 1) suppression and management of insect and disease pests; 2) crop nutrition and fertilization; 3) marketing and adding value; and 4) new varieties, crops, and products. Growers reinforced their preference for face-to-face interaction and indicated they would like to see more field day opportunities.

LIFE understands that the economic success of agricultural producers relies on the growers’ ability to adapt farming principles and practices to integrate the latest technology and research developments. LIFE establishes critical on-farm field experiments and workshops in conjunction with growers to tackle pressing crop production issues that strive to improve productivity and profitability. A few examples would include: pesticide safety, spray calibration, crop protection rotational programs, risk management, food safety, spray coverage, perpetuation of taro, integrated pest management, sustainable and organic farming, and variety trials to overcome new and challenging pests, organic cultivation, marketing, and adding value.

Field day activities using the hands-on teaching demonstration method enables growers to see the impact of LIFE’s recommendations first hand. We also believe repetition and continuous reinforcement of previous topics is important because of language difficulty and for information retention. Based on mean workshop evaluation scores from educational programs in 2011-2012, growers felt educational programs conducted by LIFE were excellent (3.5) based on a mean score of 1 = poor and 4 = excellent. LIFE anticipates continuing its delivery of high quality—‘excellent’ educational programs and advancing awareness, adoption, and evaluation of best management strategies and recommendations brought forth by the LIFE training team members.

Many of our farmers prefer a one-on-one or close-knit small group-learning environment because they are easily intimidated by government agencies and shy to discuss their problems in front of others. Establishment of a non-threatening environment is very critical to farmers with limited English proficiency.

For many new immigrant farmers in Hawaii, the agriculture business is a family business. First generation farmers appreciate the value of education and often have children (second generation children) who are educated and involved with the family business. In Hawaii, these children have a strong influence on decisions made on the farm and effectively communicate with extension personnel. LIFE works with multi-generational agricultural families and agricultural businesses that employ immigrant farmers to increase the advancement and adoption of new technology and best management practices.

The Farm Doctor program is LIFE’s core program. Field visitations to commercial agricultural operations are conducted on an ongoing basis to provide crop production consultation support. Through farm visitations, we work with growers in conducting a ‘farm checkup’ to ensure farms are in good diagnostic order. We strive to develop a strong, trusting working relationship with growers to address priority issues and develop appropriate solutions to meet their needs. Bilingual material filled with color photographs and terminologies in lay-terms are used in conjunction with translators to support field visitations and educational events.
A common performance indicator used to assess program effectiveness of the LIFE program is the adoption or application of research based technologies. As agricultural Extension professionals, we continuously look for new methodology to increase the application and adoption of research-based technologies. Based on the mean of workshop evaluation survey responses in 2011-2012, growers indicated learning 5-9 new things with potential on farm application, based on a mean score of 2.6 with zero=nothing applicable, 1=1-2 things that could be applicable, 2=3-4 new things that could be applicable, 3=5-9 new things that could be applicable, 4=10 or more new things could be applicable.

Our ability to provide service to rural, socially disadvantaged, underserved, and limited resource producers of Hawaii is largely due to a team-based and grass-roots approach to providing extension education through collaborative partnerships with statewide agricultural agencies such as UH CTAHR, Hawaii State Department of Agriculture, USDA, Hawaii State Department of Health, agricultural field agents, county agencies, Hawaii Farm Bureau, industry collaborators, and other essential public and private organizations. These partnerships enable LIFE to educate growers about a wide spectrum of priority agricultural topics while providing opportunities for growers to meet and take advantage of available government programs in a safe and conducive learning environment.

Our long term goal is to assist growers in becoming self-directed, active information seekers and adopters of new research-based agricultural advances. LIFE is a year-to-year, grant funded collaborative project between the UH College of Tropical Agriculture and Human Resources (CTAHR) and the USDA, Risk Management Agency.

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