The Changing Face of California Agriculture

Identifying Challenges and Providing Opportunities for Southeast Asian and other Minority Farmers

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On a sunny afternoon in mid-April, Lo Saetern and his wife can’t pick their strawberries fast enough to satisfy customer demand. It’s the beginning of the season and their regulars have been pining for Saetern’s opening day to taste their fresh, sweet Chandler berries. Lo and his wife have been farming a five acre plot for 15 years on the outskirts of Sacramento in an area slated for development, and have managed to build a life based on their meager farm income and his wife’s side job. Mae Yang wasn’t so lucky. In 2002, labor inspectors descended on her strawberry patch near Fresno and fined her $11,000 for not carrying workers compensation insurance for her extended family members who were helping her pick. It took her five years to pay off that debt on her credit card, and meanwhile, she lost her farm. At least two dozen farmers in Fresno are facing onerous fines, like Mae, for practicing cultural traditions (labor reciprocity) that were commonplace in highland Laos but are illegal here. This article aims to highlight both some of the challenges that farmers of Southeast Asian origin encounter and the programs that are engaging these farmers in overcoming these challenges as they establish their new lives in California.
Introduction
Over the past few decades, the farming landscape of California has become more diverse, as increasing numbers of immigrant and minority farmers try their hand at agriculture. For example, there has been nearly a 20 percent increase in Latino farmers from 2002 to 2007 in California and 75 percent of those reported Latino farms are beginning farmers (USDA Agriculture Census, 2007); a reflection of previous farm workers beginning to establish their own small family farms. In addition, since the late 1970s and early ‘80s, several thousand Southeast Asian refugee farmers, escaping their war-torn countries of Laos and Vietnam, have settled in the Sacramento and San Joaquin valleys, growing and marketing more than 100 varieties of Asian produce. In Fresno County alone, almost half of the family farms (4,000) are operated by “minorities,” and more than half of those are Asian (54 percent), the majority of which are refugee farmers from Laos (Molinar and Yang, 2001). As recently as 2004, tens of thousands of Hmong and Iu-Mien refugees arrived in California, and many of them turned to farming as their primary livelihood. The total acreage of “oriental vegetables” in Fresno County nearly doubled over the course of ten years (from 1994-2004), and by 2012 Fresno County’s production of oriental vegetables totaled more than 12,600 tons and was valued at 9.6 million dollars (Fresno County Crop Report, 1994-2004 and 2012); much of this increase is attributed to the influx of farmers from Laos.

Although the acreage of immigrant and minority farms is relatively small (5 percent), their sheer numbers (nearly a quarter of all California farms have minority operators), their contribution to California’s crop diversity, their value in terms of specialty commodities grown, their role in provision of culturally-relevant foods for California’s diverse population, and their importance in ensuring food security for their oftentimes economically-disadvantaged communities all render minority farmers an important part of California agriculture. Yet language and cultural barriers often impede their attempt to navigate the laws and regulations related to farming and food safety, to identify markets, and to secure fair land leases. Furthermore, many cultivate very small patches (between 2 to 15 acres in size) in historically important agricultural areas that are being threatened with urban development and sprawl. As a result, there is a real need to provide effective and enduring education and outreach to support the success of these new farmers and conservation of historical agricultural lands.

With funding from the University of California’s Division of Agriculture and Natural Resources and the USDA’s National Research Initiative and Beginning Farmer and Rancher Development Program, a team of researchers from UC Berkeley, UC Cooperative Extension, and non-profit community and regional partners has conducted research and created innovative outreach programs for minority and refugee farmers that are culturally appropriate and linguistically accessible. This article focuses on Southeast Asian farmers in particular, highlighting the challenges they have encountered in adapting their cultural farming practices to an entirely different industrial agricultural landscape in California’s Central Valley. We conclude by outlining some key areas that advocates and extension academics might consider when working with Southeast Asian and other underserved limited-English language populations.

Our findings are the result of in-depth semi-structured interviews with farmers, UC Cooperative Extension Advisors, and regulators and individual in-person surveys with a stratified random sample of 83 Southeast Asian farmers. We drew our sample from a compilation of three lists in each county: 1) the Agricultural Commissioner’s Certified Producers Certificate holders, 2) Pesticide Permits, and 3) UC Cooperative Extension outreach lists. Of those surveyed 13 percent are strawberry growers and 87 percent are mixed vegetable growers.

Southeast Asian Farms in California
The majority of farmers surveyed are originally from Laos (93 percent), three percent from Vietnam and four percent from Thailand. 68 percent are Hmong, 15 percent Iu-Mien, 15 percent Lao, and two percent Khmoo. We found that the majority had practiced farming in their country of origin (80 percent), and that many turned to farming in the US either as an alternative or supplement to welfare or other low-wage job such as custodial work, meat processing, landscaping, dishwashing, and warehouse work.

The median farm size is 8.8 acres, ranging from 0.5 to 60 acres (only one farmer had 60 acres), with nearly half being five acres or less. Gross revenues from these farming operations are small, ranging primarily between $5,000 and $50,000 annually, well below the USDA’s definition of a small family farm ($250,000 gross sales per year or less). More than half of these farmers (51 percent) rely on other sources of off-farm income including income from other household members (such as their spouse and grown children). Farming is what they know best, yet it fails to meet their household financial needs. Indeed, when asked if they could earn enough money from a 9-5 job to support their families, 65 percent said they would stop farming all together.
Also noteworthy is our finding that only 23 percent of the farmers we surveyed indicated that their children plan to continue with the family farming business. Our survey data showed that the top five challenges Southeast Asian farmers face are: 1) access to capital/financing, 2) low price, 3) conforming to state and federal regulations, 4) language barriers, and 5) access to reliable labor. For an overview of other challenges, see Figure 1. We expand on some of these challenges below.

Limited Access to Business Planning, Production, Regulatory and Market Information
Even as some minority farmers are able to access land and grow crops, they report difficulty accessing capital/financing, understanding and navigating environmental and labor regulations such as OSHA, finding quality farmland and securing fair leases, accessing agricultural support programs, and accessing markets. Farmers repeatedly cite low prices, a large surplus of product, and no market. They ask for support to help them find new markets, which requires a solid understanding of crop and business planning, food safety and liability insurance requirements, and invoicing and payment structures. Compounding this situation is a general lack of knowledge about programs ostensibly designed to help them (i.e. NRCS & FSA programs). Many beginning and immigrant farmers are unable to take advantage of agricultural credit, loan and Individual Development Account (IDA) opportunities because they fail to meet basic eligibility requirements: a signed three-year lease, demonstrated record keeping and sales records. Few farmers we work with know if their enterprise is breaking even, let alone making a profit, as they are not accustomed to keeping track of expenses and revenues.

Clash of Cultures in Labor Regulations
Laws designed to regulate exploitative labor practices on large industrial farms are threatening to undermine Hmong and other small Southeast Asian family farms, which rely on an age-old cultural practice of labor exchange. Customary arrangements in which families help each other out during times of need in exchange for a portion of the crop or a promise of reciprocity are illegal in this country. Since 2004, dozens of multi-agency sweeps have been carried out on farms in Fresno County, California. Hmong and Iu-Mien farmers have been prosecuted for a variety of infractions including their failure to carry workers’ compensation insurance for anyone working on their farms (including wives, sons, and parents), and for violations of other Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) laws (such as not having gender-segregated toilets) and failure to pay extended family members and friends minimum wage. Although the sweeps were purportedly aimed at large, industrial growers, at least 26 Southeast Asian family farmers in Fresno were cited between 2004-2012, and our evidence suggests their citations have been disproportionately deleterious. These challenges require poor farmers to pay onerous fines, sometimes equivalent to half a year’s gross revenue. Many of these farmers believe they have been unfairly targeted, and some 50 farmers have reportedly left farming completely for fear of being fined. Richard Molinar, a University of California Cooperative Extension Advisor in Fresno, explained in 2011 that he spent a full three-quarters of his time educating Hmong growers about California agricultural laws, advocating for their support at the state level, and helping them appeal their numerous citations in court, mostly to no avail.

Linguistic and Cultural Barriers
Language and cultural barriers often limit farmers’ abilities to access, learn about, and implement sustainable and safe farming practices. These challenges also pose great risk and difficulty in accessing fair and reliable markets and negotiating a fair price. Organizations that provide outreach to minority farmers have expressed difficulty locating and communicating with these grower populations. As one advisor put it, “we have the capacity to invite farmers to the table, but don’t always get them to the table.” Farmers that do come to the table oftentimes have difficulty understanding technical language, as many translators are not farmers themselves. Others avoid services entirely, sometimes out of historical mistrust of the government. As such, many new farmers rely on their friends and relatives for support in establishing their farms and learning new techniques. Our program...
has worked to expand the network of support for these growers, building the capacity of both existing farmer networks and the organizations that serve them. We have developed and implemented workshops and training materials that utilize graphic and photo-heavy educational hand-outs and videos with translations into languages when possible (not all Southeast Asian languages have written scripts, and even some that do, many farmers are not literate). For sample videos, please see the following link: http://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLXVznDyivQ32GFvKi2UO8X8EM0ch-ktDHW

**Food Safety Barriers**

Our research has found that buyers (including school districts, retailers and increasingly wholesalers) now require farmers to supply documented evidence of a food safety program. Small farmers across the country are struggling to develop food safety programs in anticipation of new regulations and market demand, yet they often have limited time and resources. Minority and limited-English farmers are at an added disadvantage due to the complexity and inaccessibility of most online food safety training materials. To make such training more accessible and culturally-relevant, our team piloted a Food Safety for Small Farms program in Sacramento and Fresno that enabled 10 farmers to sell to school districts, garnering an additional $50,000 annually among all farms. Many buyers are now beginning to require expensive third party audits. Despite extensive outreach to support Hmong farmers to learn about and comply with Good Agriculture Practices (GAPs) required by their buyers, many are still unable to afford the $550 annual fee to become third-party certified and have had to find alternative markets or stop farming altogether.

**Food and Livelihood Insecurity**

While California is touted as the breadbasket of the world, food insecurity is reaching record highs in California (California Watch, 16 Nov. 2010). Many Hmong and Lu-Mien live below the poverty line and have relied on welfare to make ends meet. Despite the many barriers facing beginning minority and immigrant farmers, some have managed to lease land and grow a spectacular assortment of both traditional and conventional crops. These plots are critical to their livelihoods. For those that have scaled up, some successfully market their produce through farmers’ markets, farm stands and to packinghouses; however, many watch their crop rot, or plow it under, due to lack of markets or low prices. Incomes remain low and unstable. Many of these small farms play dual roles of feeding their families and sales for the market – a kind of semi-subsistence farming lifestyle.

**Extension Strategies for Success**

To be able to effectively reach immigrant and minority groups requires time to build relationships of trust. Hiring staff that speak the farmers’ languages has proven particularly effective in the case of UCCE Fresno. Michael Yang, a Hmong small farm and specialty crop assistant, who works with Richard Molinar, a small farm advisor, has played a central role in recruitment, translation, and extension follow up. Chuck Ingels, UCCE Horticultural Advisor in Sacramento has also built up a tremendous extension program, hosting annual strawberry meetings drawing more Asian farmers than are counted in the agricultural census. Farmers eagerly anticipate the annual meetings as an opportunity not only to renew their pesticide permits and learn about new market opportunities and food safety, but more importantly to exchange information with one another. Our program utilizes an outreach model that is farmer-directed, moving beyond workshops and field days alone, to provide one-on-one follow up, what we are calling a “workshop-coach connection.” This starts with assessing farmer needs through focus groups, followed by hands-on workshops on farmer-selected topics, combined with in-depth on-farm training with a few locally identified community grower-leaders. Grower-leaders are trained and are linked with each other and with the organizations providing outreach. UCCE and local non-profit partners then provide ongoing on-farm “coaching” to grower-leaders to support adoption of recommended practices. Grower-leaders then host “learning circles” or field days at their farms to share their acquired knowledge and practices and can provide ongoing advice to farmers in their communities with continued support from dedicated CBOs and UCCE advisors. This kind of farmer-to-farmer training has been proven an effective strategy for knowledge and technical transference around the world (Warner, 2006; Swezey and Broome, 2000).

**Conclusion**

Our research and extension model has led to greater levels of understanding, trust, and adoption of recommended practices, and has fostered networks of mentor farmers who share knowledge with other farmers. We expect that by increasing grower-leader knowledge and adoption of sustainable agriculture, food safety, and business planning and marketing skills, we will see increases in farm productivity, safer food, and greater income opportunities on Southeast Asian farms throughout the region.

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