

National Immigrant Farming Initiative

Talking Points for Immigrant Farming

This document highlights information about immigrant farming that may be useful for policy discussions, press events and outreach, conferences, and other speaking engagements.

Note: In this document, the term 'immigrant farmers' includes farmers with refugee status.

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Immigrant Farming and Agriculture Today

The 2002 Census of Agriculture suggests that immigrants are the fastest growing sector of farmers today. Immigrant farmers are passionate about and experienced in agriculture, and have shaped the character of U.S. agriculture throughout American history. At a time when the number of farms in our country is declining, it is especially remarkable to see immigrant farmers, particularly Hispanic farmers, increasing by large proportions. Immigrant farmers are diverse in terms of country of origin, where they live, what they produce, and how they sell. By supporting these new and aspiring farmers, we help a new generation of farmers create viable livelihoods and contribute to the vitality of our agriculture and rural communities.

Current State of U.S. Agriculture

- The number of entry-level farmers replacing retiring farmers dropped 30 percent in the past 15 years. (Center for Rural Affairs)ⁱ
- The number of farm operators under 65 declined by 25 percent from 1978 to 1997. (*Rural America*)ⁱⁱ
- The number of farms in the United States declined by almost 4% from 1997 to 2002. (2002 Census of Agriculture)
- Two classes of farms by size of operation increased: those with 10-49 acres increased by 6%; and those with over 2,000 acres increased by 5%. (2002 Census of Agriculture)
- The number of farmers markets grew from 342 in 1970 to 2,842 in 2000. (*Geographical Review*)ⁱⁱⁱ

Who are immigrant farmers today?

- Hispanic farmers are the fastest growing demographic group of new farmers in the country. The number of Hispanic farmers increased by 50% between 1997 and 2002, from 33,450 to 50,000. (2002 Census of Agriculture)ⁱ
- An estimated 78% of crop workers in the U.S. are foreign-born, according to USDA's Agricultural Resource Management Survey. Many of these individuals apply experience gained as farmworkers to start their own farms.
- Immigrant farmers bring agricultural traditions from all over the world – Latin America and the Caribbean, Asia, Africa, the Middle East, and Europe.
- In Fresno County, "oriental vegetables" have been steadily increasing, accounting for \$7.3 million in sales in 2002, \$10.3 million in sales in 2003, and almost \$15.8 million in sales in 2004. (Annual Crop Report – Fresno County Agricultural Commissioner)

¹ Small and new operators, and often women and minority operators, are often underrepresented in the census.

ⁱ Patricia Callahan, "Aspiring Farmers Benefit From Land Programs," *Wall Street Startup Journal*, August 16, 2002.

ⁱⁱ Fred Gale, "The Graying Farm Sector: Legacy of Off-Farm Migration," *Rural America*, 17:3 (2002), p. 28-31.

ⁱⁱⁱ Allison Brown, "Counting Farmers Markets," *The Geographical Review*, 91:4 (2001), pp. 655-674.

Opportunities for Immigrant Farmers

- Immigrant farmers are passionate about and experienced in agriculture.
- Immigrants and refugees often come from rural areas, bringing valuable farming skills and experience from their home countries and sometimes from the United States.
- Many immigrants know how to grow and market ethnic crops such as sweet potato leaves, bitter ball, garden eggs, lemongrass, pea tendrils, tomatillos, papalo, pipicha, squash blossoms, and more.
- Demand for ethnic crops and culturally appropriate foods creates new markets. Immigrant farmers have revitalized some farmers' markets by meeting local demand for these products.
- Availability of traditional foods positively impacts the health of immigrant and refugee communities, by providing healthy foods that these communities know how to prepare.
- Immigrants often have strong family support systems that provide capital, labor, and other resources.

Challenges for Immigrant Farmers

- Adapting to a new climate and different farming practices and translating knowledge and skills from home countries to farming in the United States.
- Understanding the U.S. agricultural system and how to access agricultural programs. Though some agricultural agencies have spearheaded efforts to assist immigrants, many such agencies lack staff who speak local immigrant farmers' languages or are familiar with their crops.
- Language and cultural barriers – operating in a new language and culture is a significant challenge.
- Immigrants often have limited capital and limited credit history, making it hard to buy land, farm equipment, and get capital for other start-up costs.
- Some farmers and farmworkers may be undocumented, which can lead to a myriad of challenges. People applying for Green Cards have sometimes found the process to be slow, limiting their ability to move forward with their farm businesses.

About the National Immigrant Farming Initiative – NIFI

- NIFI is an effort of Heifer International and other partners around the country.
- Rooted in diverse immigrant farmer experience, NIFI strengthens the capacity of immigrants to farm successfully and to advance sustainable farming and food systems.
- NIFI provides training, networking opportunities, information sharing, and advocacy in order to increase resources, visibility, and support for immigrant farmers.

About Immigrant Farming Projects

- In response to the growing numbers of immigrant farmers, projects have emerged throughout the country to support them. There exist around 20 such projects today.
- Immigrant farming projects help farmers navigate new farming systems, language and cultural barriers, and provide other assistance and support.
- Immigrant farming projects exist in Washington, California, Texas, Minnesota, Wisconsin, Georgia, New York, Maine, Massachusetts, Nebraska, Pennsylvania, Florida, and Oregon.

For more facts and figures go to:

www.nass.usda.gov/

www.dol.gov/asp/programs/agworker/

www.ers.usda.gov/briefing/arms/

www.ers.usda.gov/StateFacts/

www.ams.usda.gov/farmersmarkets/

www.immigrantfarming.org

Census of Agriculture – USDA/ NASS

Agricultural Workers Survey – DOL

Agricultural Resource Management Survey – USDA/ ERS

State Fact Sheets on farms, income, and more – USDA / ERS

Facts and Figures on Farmers' Markets – USDA/ARMS

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