

SMALL FARM DIGEST

Critical Needs of Small Farmers and Ranchers

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Photo: Lelan Dixon, USDA-NIFA

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Small Farm Digest

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A Word from Dr. Denis Ebodaghe, National Program Leader for NIFA’s Small Farm Program

Critical needs for small farmers and ranchers are numerous and are worthy of discussion so we can adequately address these challenges for the success of small farmers and ranchers in today’s economy. Some of the critical needs include financing, land access, personal and community issues. These and others will be discussed in this issue of the Small Farm Digest. Many thanks to Scott Elliott of the NIFA communications staff for editing the submissions contained in this Fall edition of the Small Farm Digest and to the Authors for the time spent in putting thoughts in writing.



This issue of the Small Farm Digest focuses on Critical needs for Small Farmers and Ranchers. Contributors include:

- Ms. Lorette Picciano from the Rural Coalition in Washington, DC. This article focuses on respect, relationships, resources and results’ principles in forming a good starting point in identifying critical needs of our nation’s small farmers and nurturing this growing sector of our agriculture and food system
- Dr. Marion Simon from Kentucky State University, Frankfort Kentucky discusses personal and community relationships as they relate to the critical needs of small farmers and ranchers.
- Dr. Mickie Swisher from the University of Florida. Some of the issues discussed are financing needs for new and beginning farmers, food safety, land values, applying technologies that can reduce the risks of climate change.

*While NIFA has provided technical editing of the included contributions, the accuracy of data cited and the opinions expressed therein are the sole responsibility of the authors.

Critical Needs of Small Farmers and Ranchers: Respect, Relationships, Resources, and Results



Lorette Picciano, Executive Director Rural Coalition/Coalición Rural

The Rural Coalition (RC), founded in 1978, works to promote just and sustainable rural development with this nation’s small farmers, ranchers, farmworkers, and rural communities. Over the years, we have worked with our diverse members to secure policies that remove entrenched barriers and provide opportunities to producers and to develop methods and models that serve our unique constituencies, almost all of whom would be classified as small farmers. As one of the most diverse of rural organizations, we have been informed not only the needs, but by the unique capacities and wisdom of our “grassiest of the grassroots” member organizations.

In a dialogue RC and other community-based organizations (CBO) groups undertook with the National Agriculture Statistics Service (NASS) before the 2002 and later the 2007 Census of Agriculture, we learned from earlier models from Intertribal Agriculture Council and others to explore how we could work together to align our work and accomplish shared goals. NASS wanted to ensure a more correct and complete Census of Agriculture. The tribal and CBOs that represent the nation’s diverse producers wanted a more accurate reflection of the numbers and economic contributions of these producers.

In the dialogue, we focused on four things: Mutual **respect**, productive **relationships**, **resources** to assure time could be allocated to the task of informing producers what the census is, why it is important, and how the information of individual producers is used and protected. And, we wanted to show **results** through improvements in accuracy in reflecting the economic contributions of these

diverse producers. These same principles form a good starting point in identifying critical needs of our nation's small farmers and nurturing this growing sector of our agriculture and food system.

Respect – As a student at two of our nation's land-grant universities (Cornell University and the University of Hawaii), I focused on extension and diffusion of innovation. In my months of graduate research in the Central Luzon, Philippines, I remember so clearly an important lesson from the extension leader at the CBO where I worked. He responded to a presentation by the local university encouraging adoption of new rice varieties by exclaiming, "This rice produces somewhat more, but how can we ask the wives to plant three times each year!" He proposed that instead of seeking better outreach to convince farmers to adopt the variety, we should work with them, their wives, and family on what they wanted in their community. In over two decades of work here in the United States with RC, I, with my colleagues, continue to employ participatory research methods – which **starts with** and is built upon the wisdom, expertise, and shared knowledge of our communities and the small farmers, ranchers, and farmworkers who are our members.

Farmers and ranchers are machinists (well, all machines except computers, at times), soil scientists, engineers, geneticists, social scientists, and most of all, teachers, mentors, and learners. Sustaining a family from the land may not earn one an advanced academic degree, but how many in our society could go out and do it and succeed?

Our members have also taught us all that farmworkers are also skilled professionals. To harvest crops at the critical time in the correct way, while also earning enough to support a family and protect one's health and dignity, takes skill and determination that most others do not possess. And, many if not most migrant farmworkers, are farmers too—with farms, or displaced from farms, in another location.

The traditional knowledge of our nation's earliest producers, and that brought from similar communities across the earth, also is an important source of wisdom within communities—and for the rest of society—on protecting land, water, and seeds. One of our colleagues has shared his work to grow and preserve the dryland corn of his tribe and feed and sustain the traditions of the community. He emphasizes that to preserve traditional corn varieties they must be planted every year to allow adaptation to changing conditions. The ears that survive the toughest years, for example, provide the very seeds that can withstand the dry years in the future.

Small farmers and farmworkers—those who have been on the land for generations, and the new ones making their way into the field across the nation—critically need policymakers and researchers to respect and value their expertise and wisdom, including generations of traditional wisdom; and to work with them as partners as we craft our future food and farm systems.

Relationships – Strong networks of relationships are critical to all small farmers. In our work with NASS, state statisticians have become more deeply familiar with the diverse community-based farmer organizations in the states they serve. Similarly, the stronger the working relationships between—and among—local USDA offices, research universities, extension, and small farmers and the organizations that represent them, the better the needs of small farmers can be met.

World Farmers (WF), in Lancaster, Mass., has worked for more than 30 years to welcome refugee farmers to the 70-acre Flats Mentor Farm. Led by Maria Moreira, herself a farmer, refugees from Asia, Africa, and other parts of the world receive land, hands-on technical and training assistance, and mentoring to produce and market their crops. This program has evolved from the original relationship

between an immigrant farmer and a recently arrived Hmong refugee farmer to the program that exists today where 275 farmers market their crops at more than 40 farmers markets in the Boston area. This evolutionary process has been possible through the cooperation of USDA's Rural Development, Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) and Farm Service Agency (FSA). Rural Development has been instrumental in the development of a cooperative; FSA has assisted farmers with loans and the Noninsured Crop Disaster Assistance Program (NAP); and NRCS with the season extension using high tunnels. As of 2015, farmers own nine high tunnels and five more farmers have submitted applications and are at various stages of a completion. An increasing number of farmers use NAP each year.

The Massachusetts USDA team has developed the expertise to work together with farmers who might not speak perfect English but who show up at the office without an interpreter because they think they do not need one. This exemplary team also goes to the farm to teach farmers how to measure their plots in order to participate in the NAP program, prepare leases, and work out financing in order to participate in the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) high tunnels. With the USDA Rural Development support, the cooperative is building the capacity of farmers to meet standards in direct and wholesale marketing. This model of USDA agency-CBO cooperation in the delivery of services, with new support from a Beginning Farmer and Rancher Development Program (BFRDP) grant, deserves replication across USDA and communities serving small and new entry producers.

Oklahoma Black Historical Research Project, Inc. (OBPHRI) is working with African-American and Native American producers around Oklahoma who are coping with the sixth year of drought, frequent tornados, and a massive infestation of red cedar that consumes up to half the acreage of their small-scale cow and calf operations. OBHRPI developed a model for a low-cost solar water well for cattle that was accepted by NRCS, and is now being adopted across the state by many producers. OBHRPI is now working on innovative technology to pull out full red cedar trees and cooperatively develop markets for this product—turning an invasive species into a product. The challenges facing rural communities and farmers in Oklahoma are huge; with support from NRCS, the Forest Service and other USDA agencies, the strengthening relationships and building on farmer-proposed solutions are strategies that are beginning to pay dividends.

Resources: For the past decade, we have focused with our members on developing “Innovative Solutions to USDA Exclusions.” With our members, we have looked for solutions on many issues, including two critical ones: the lack of trust or knowledge of many small scale producers towards USDA offices, and the lack of knowledge of USDA programs or applicability of programs to the needs of small scale producers.

Hands-on technical assistance from CBOs that represent, are accountable to, and trusted by small and diverse farmers was a critical component of almost all progress in the communities where we work—whether it be in helping farmers and ranchers understand and learn the importance of the Agriculture Census to them, and how to participate and use it; or how to access services; or develop partnerships with extension and research institutions to meet their needs.

Support for this hands-on assistance is a critical need of small and the new generation of new-entry farmers. Thus, securing increased funding for the Outreach and Assistance Program for Socially Disadvantaged and Veteran Farmers and Ranchers (OASDVFR), as well as with our colleagues—BFRDP, the Federally Recognized Tribal Development Program (FRTEP), the Sustainable Agriculture and Education (SARE) Program, and the Rural Cooperative Development Program—became priorities

in our Farm Bill work. Additional work is necessary to address the challenges of accessing these programs, and showing their results are continued priorities in order to maintain and restore funding in a tough fiscal climate.

But producers themselves also needed direct assistance. In our fieldwork over many years, we consistently noted the farmers and ranchers who had long received little in USDA support were especially excited about a few practices and programs, including seasonal high tunnels and microloans.

RC had long supported the proposal of the Federation of Southern Cooperatives for a low-documentation microloan program to help small farmers improve their operations. Before the 2012 Farm Bill, FSA had instituted the program, which was formally authorized in the 2012 Farm Bill. Our members also worked through the Food and Farm Policy Diversity Initiative on policies to provide higher cost share rates for socially disadvantaged and beginning farmers and ranchers in the EQIP program. After the program was approved in the 2008 Farm Bill, RC also wrote comments encouraging USDA to adopt high tunnels as a conservation technical practice.

Producers and farmworkers also need to address legal risks, and need organizations such as the Land Loss Prevention Project to assist with review of contracts, wills, and business development and to assure heir property and mineral or other leases that can encumber titles to their land are addressed. Resources for this category of technical assistance are also essential.

Resources for small farmers are also expanded through sharing of knowledge and economic cooperation. For more than four decades, the Federation of Southern Cooperatives has helped thousands of farmers and rural residents develop farming cooperatives, and credit unions. Groups like World Farmers, the Federation of Southern Cooperatives, Operation Spring Plant, Arkansas Land and Farm Development Project, and many others have worked with land-grant universities and others to provide technical assistance on meeting market standards, and even access new markets, such as for energy and bio-fuel production. Others, such as the Taos County Economic Development Corporation and Missouri Rural Crisis Center have refined food system models to help producers meet market standards to bring buffalo, cattle, and hogs to market and to develop and access value added products. National Hmong American Farmers, in partnership with the Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service, has developed an innovative outreach model—a weekly call-in radio show to reach Hmong producers in Fresno, Calif., with specialized information related to the needs of producers there. National Latino Farmers and Ranchers Trade Association, now celebrating a decade of work, assists Hispanic and Latino Farmers and Ranchers on Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS) and improved access and equity in a wide range of USDA programs, including the Agriculture Census.

These are only a few examples of field and farm derived strategies and program proposals that work in the field, not only for diverse and other small farmers and ranchers, but also for all farmers.

Results: Good ideas spread quickly among farmers and ranchers. Investments in effective models of hands-on technical assistance, cooperative development, and partnerships between USDA, CBOs, and land-grant partners are also demonstrating real and tangible results and are ripe for expansion and research.

There are now more than 15,000 NRCS-funded high tunnels installed on farms around the nation, making it one of the most popular NRCS programs. More important, farmers and ranchers who have

never been or have not in a long time been to NRCS and FSA offices have returned to seek programs, like high tunnels, that work for them.

More than 14,790 microloans have been obligated by FSA from Jan. 17, 2013, to Sept. 14, 2015¹. In California, two Hmong Farmers are now using long awaited tractors after accessing microloans with assistance from National Hmong American Farmers.

The shared work of organizations and agencies working to increase both the participation of Socially Disadvantaged Farmers and Ranchers in the Census of Agriculture and in USDA programs is also showing tangible results—in 2012, the Census of Agriculture shows a combined increase of 8,372 American Indian, African-American, and Asian American principal operators and an increase of 11,430 Hispanic principal operators. While there may be overlaps between the race and ethnicity categories, the combined total growth among is just shy of **20,000 principal operators**.

While not all new producers, the numbers show that not only have retired producers been replaced, but new producers or new to USDA producers have replaced them. This net increase reflects a contribution of almost 20 percent toward Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack’s goal of 100,000 new farmers.

SDA Principal Operators

	2007	2012		%Change
American Indian	34,706	37,851	3,145	9%
Asian	11,214	13,669	2,455	22%
Black	30,599	33,371	2,772	9%
Totals	76,519	84,891	8,372	11%

	2007	2012		%Change
Total Hispanic	55,570	67,000	11,430	21%

The 2012 Census of Agriculture numbers for all farm operators show an even greater combined net increase since 2007—11,369 more American Indian, African-American, and Asian American producers and an increase of 17,234 Hispanic producers. While there may be overlaps between the race and ethnicity categories, the combined total net growth in all operators in these exceeds 28,000. This net increase would reflect a contribution of over 28 percent toward the Secretary’s goal of 100,000 new farmers.

All SDA Farm Operators

	2007	2012		% Change
American Indian	55,889	58,475	2,586	5%
Asian	18,289	22,140	3,851	21%
Black	39,697	44,629	4,932	12%
Totals	113,875	125,244	11,369	10%

	2007	2012		%Change
Hispanic	82,462	99,734	17,272	21%

¹ According to Farm Service Agency Office of Outreach, Sept. 15, 2015.

There remain many challenges for small and diverse farmers and ranchers. A critical one remains securing and tracking matching funds for small farmer groups and producers that have started with fewer resources. Waivers, matching requirements, or more incentives for partnerships with minority-serving and other land-grant institutions that benefit both could help. Multi-year funding is another.

Investments in our nation's diverse farmers, ranchers, and farmworkers are not only critical. They are beneficial. OASDVFR, for example, has served more than 100,000 rural constituents and is an invaluable resource for the more than 400 counties in more than 35 states where it has been implemented, serving a wide range of historically underserved farmers and ranchers living in persistent poverty areas of the country, as well as their families and children. ⁱ

These activities fall directly in line with the White House Initiative, ***“Opportunity for All Fighting Rural Child Poverty.”*** OASDVFR, BFRDP, and other similar efforts support the technical assistance that helps ensure that USDA and other federal agencies work with key external partners to “accelerate policy innovations... and increase investments in areas of child poverty.”ⁱⁱ In areas where support for technical assistance has been targeted to these groups, diverse farm families and tribal, rural, urban communities are reengaging in agriculture in the very areas where poverty is most severe and the need for affordable and nutritious food and jobs the greatest. Investments in innovative agriculture and entrepreneurial training and outreach programs can and do provide valuable skills and experience to prepare young and new-entry farmers for careers in agriculture.

Moreover, these investments in community-based participatory research in cooperation with communities long on the land also have the potential to address critical resource concerns and improve resilience in areas such as Oklahoma, or the forests of Northern New Mexico, or in response to the long-term droughts in California's Central Valley. Our agriculture system is also evolving and changing and with investments in the southeast, the southwest, urban areas, and areas where rural poverty is concentrated, we may find that the innovations by small farmers will help lead the change we need to protect large areas of our land and resource base and reinvigorate agriculture as a driver of economies and sustainability in rural communities.