



LEOPOLD CENTER  
FOR SUSTAINABLE AGRICULTURE

# Assessing needs and fostering agricultural entrepreneurship among immigrants in several Iowa communities

Abstract: Two Iowa communities learn about opportunities to support local immigrant populations with an interest in farming enterprises.

## Question & Answer

**Q:** What are the emerging possibilities for Iowa farmers to expand their local and regional farmer networks?

**A:** Engaging new Latino immigrant farmers in established networks can create opportunities for mutual learning about production and processing techniques and crop varieties, and collaborative development of new markets. Expanding these farmer networks also opens doors for retiring farmers looking for beginning farmers to whom to transition their farm operations.

- Identify challenges faced by immigrant farmers and other possible new farmers, and
- Specify a strategy for participatory development of a program that would increase opportunities to initiate or grow food and fiber enterprises.

## Approach and methods

Surveys were conducted among Mexican and Central American immigrants in Denison and Marshalltown. The 111 respondents were first-generation immigrants over the age of 18 with any type of farming experience. (A couple of

## Background

As today's farmers age and retire, immigrants from Mexico and Central America who possess farming backgrounds and diverse sets of crop and livestock production skills could become tomorrow's land stewards and food producers. This project sought to learn whether the immigrants in the Denison area were interested in farming in Iowa. The information was to be combined with that from a similar survey in Marshalltown to help local leaders determine how best to assist these potential new farmers.

Objectives were to:

- Investigate and characterize immigrants' past farming experiences and interest in farming in Iowa,



Jose Arreola and his family farm 10 acres in western Iowa, where they raise chickens, turkeys, pigs, cattle, and other livestock. He keeps alive the "charreada" tradition of his native Mexico, a festival similar to the American rodeo, by teaching his children to ride horseback.

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\$4,616 for year one

business owners without farming ties were interviewed to see if they were better poised to start farming.) Denison surveys were conducted at a Mexican grocery store, two churches, two English classes, a Denison Latino Soccer League game, and with people involved in a community garden project.

### Results and discussion

Ninety-two of 111 respondents (83 percent) grew up on a farm. Of these, nearly 80 percent said the farm was owned within their nuclear family, while others lived on farms owned by grandparents or other extended family members. Ten acres was the median size of farm where respondents grew up, and their families typically produced a variety of crops and livestock. Likewise, respondents were interested in raising a mix of grain crops, vegetables and livestock on small acreages in Iowa. They see access to financial capital as a major barrier to starting a farm enterprise in Iowa, although those who are homeowners are less likely to view this as a challenge.

There are many commonalities among respondents, and some variations:

- Ninety-three percent of survey respondents want to farm in Iowa.
- Respondents want to farm for a variety of reasons, such as being with family, working with animals, being in nature, and for a sense of tradition and connection to their rural roots.



Arreola raises diverse poultry varieties, including the Araucana chicken, which lays green and blue eggs.

- Eighty-three percent of respondents grew up on a farm and 59 percent were farm workers.
- Reflecting a propensity for diversified production, about half have experience that combines livestock, vegetable and grain production, and roughly half want to produce livestock, vegetables and grains on a farm in Iowa.
- Women and men have very different agricultural work experience and associated skill sets. Women's experiences are concentrated in food preparation and general farm work activities, while men have more specific, farm management-related experience.
- Women want smaller farms (12 acres) on average than men do (52 acres).
- Access to capital is the most commonly cited obstacle to starting farming (86 percent of respondents) and women are more likely than men to perceive access to financial capital as the greatest obstacle to starting farming.
- Homeowners are more likely than non-homeowners to be longer-term local residents and to want to live in the area for longer into the future. They are less likely to identify access to capital as the greatest obstacle to starting farming.
- Few significant differences exist between Mexicans and Central Americans in terms of past farm experience and interest in farming in Iowa, although Central Americans are more likely than Mexicans to have coffee and fruit production experience, and to want to farm in Iowa to produce food for home consumption.

### Conclusions

University, government and community-based agricultural organizations have an important role to play in supporting Latino immigrant farmers. They can make these new farmers aware of the services available, and create multilingual access to these services for non-English speakers. Organizations could help aspiring farmers get access to credit by providing training in small business development and exploring an array of financial services, including micro-credit and individual development account programs. They also can focus on connecting beginning farmers to small acreages, which may not be far out of reach financially for some homeowners.

Once established, farmers need bilingual information on marketing, regulations, production, and business organi-

zation. It is important to note that these Mexican and Central American immigrants favor small-scale, diversified farms. Such farms integrate nicely into community-based or local food systems because they tend to feature wide product mixes, such as one would find at a farmers' market. Agricultural organizations, in concert with supporting the development of individual farmers, also could build capacity at the community level by creating the marketing structures characteristic of a local food system. Specifically, organizations should help connect farmers to a variety of markets for small or midsize diversified farmers, such as farmers markets, Community Supported Agriculture enterprises, and institutional procurement arrangements.

### Impact of results

The study results show interest in farming among Mexican and Central American immigrants in Iowa. There is value in exploring ways to identify and support individuals who would like to work on the land. By communicating these findings with local and civic leaders, and recommending ways to foster an entrepreneurial environment for Latino immigrant farmers, there is hope of catalyzing initiatives to launch new farming enterprises. Such initiatives, combined with the development of local marketing linkages, have the potential to contribute to local economic development, new livelihood opportunities for meatpacking plant workers, and new intercultural connections within the local food system.

### Education and outreach

Research findings were shared with local community leaders at the Denison Diversity Committee (November 2007), Crawford County Board of Supervisors (January 2008) and the Denison City Council (January 2008). The *Denison Bulletin* newspaper reported on the project in January 2008. A presentation was made at the Leopold Center MFSI workshop.

A slide presentation, executive summary, Spanish and English versions of the survey and a full report are to be distributed on CD-ROM to 16 county boards of supervisors and 16 city councils in Iowa areas with significant immigrant populations.

### Leveraged funds

Funding was sought through the USDA-Cooperative Research and Extension Education Service (CSREES) to implement a participatory process to develop beginning (immigrant) farmer programming in Denison and Marshalltown. A funding decision is pending.

Photos courtesy of Hannah Lewis



There are about 500 farms in Iowa with a Latino (but not necessarily immigrant) operator, according to the 2002 Census of Agriculture. Jose Arreola is among Iowa's newer farm owner-operators. Since 2006, when this photograph was taken, Arreola has converted his corn acreage to pasture for cattle.

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