Immigrant Farmer Land Access: Evolving Models

Since 1972, the Rural Development Center has been a 110-acre non-profit-owned oasis for farm opportunities in the Salinas Valley. As the salad bowl of the nation, the region is known for labor-intensive and high-value specialty crops including strawberries, brassicas, lettuce and more at large scales of production. Many farm worker families live in protracted poverty, and May ’09 unemployment rates range from 14 to 21%. Moreover, Salinas has recently been among the least affordable places in the nation when adjusted for local wages.

Evolving over more than 35 years, and operated by ALBA since 2001, programs have been honed with lessons learned, new partners, additional assets and evolving strategies. Created in 1985, the Small Farmer Education Program (PEPA) has been coupled with the opportunity to access farmland in a business incubator environment. Typically the program enrolls at least 24 students annually, roughly one-third of whom choose to start farming immediately afterwards. The number of annual tenants on 89 acres has ranged from 16-24 over the past decade.

In response to a rare opportunity, ALBA purchased the Triple M Ranch in northern Monterey County through an easement arranged by the Elkhorn Slough Foundation. Located in a sensitive riparian habitat zone, its 65 cultivable acres are accessed by 6-9 farmers each year, often with multi-year leases. Many of them are mid-career farmers who had been or continue to be contract strawberry growers on leased acreage with limited business options. Access to organic farmland and open markets generates new opportunities, along with conservation education regularly organized at the farm.

Land acquisition hinges first and foremost on business acumen and preparedness. While the incubators operated by ALBA offer a reduced-risk environment, there is no guarantee of long-term tenancy. Most growers’ families transition to one family member doing full-time (plus) work on the farm after 3-4 years, and successful land lease access or ownership starts to occur after 6-8 years. Most often land accessed outside the incubator is acquired while they maintain ALBA ground, sometimes downsizing at ALBA. Farmers in this stage of course often require assistance with business planning, infrastructure planning and lease review – and the land access opportunities are becoming more diverse in the economic downturn.

This presentation will outline the key lessons learned in integrating innovative immigrant farmers practicing organic farming in one of the most capital-intensive farming regions in the world. Successes include a long-term legacy of hundreds of families’ involvement over the years, development of stable and diverse market channels and growing the partnerships and human resources necessary to proliferate independent and collaborative farming opportunities in disenfranchised communities.

www.albafarmers.org; www.californiafarmlink.org; www.calcoastal.org