

The "New American Farmers" - Outreach Challenges and Opportunities

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Global competition, natural disasters, and other factors have caused many of America's traditional farmers and their children - descendants from central European immigrants - to reconsider their continuing involvement in the hard business of farming. This fact of American farm life and livelihood is opening new opportunities for a whole new group of immigrants from diverse ethnic backgrounds.

In the 1990s and into the New Millennium, Laotians, Cambodians, Vietnamese, Mexicans, Central and South Americans, and traditional American farm workers, among others, are increasingly becoming the "New American Farmers." More individuals from this group are becoming farm owners as well as farm operators.

American agriculture is getting its largest infusion of new blood since European immigrants in great numbers came to America in the early 1800's and took up agrarian life. According to the most recent U.S. Agriculture Census, the percentage of America's two million farmers who are white males has fallen to 88% from 91% a decade ago. Hispanic farmers or farm operators increased 32.3% from 1992 to 1997. At the 2nd National Conference on Women in Agriculture, held in Washington, D.C., in 1998, women's valuable role in agriculture was acknowledged. The percentage of farms operated by women in 1997 (165,102 farms) increased 13.7% since 1992 (145,156 farms).

The number of younger farmers from traditional American farm families who are going into the business of farming has seen a serious decline. The number of farmers under the age of 35 has plunged to 36% since 1994, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. In some cases, such an influx of ethnic groups into the American farming community could easily be a recipe for racial tension, but some ethnic groups are actually welcomed. Many Anglo growers whose children are not interested in pursuing a farming life are grateful to

find eager proteges among Mexican immigrants and other farm workers. In California, produce companies worried about a grower shortage are lending money to Mexican farm workers for farm start-ups. Farm support groups are increasingly offering "Grower of the Year" and other award incentive programs to farm workers.

USDA needs to do effective outreach work to this new crop of farmers. My challenge to all USDA agencies is this: "Are you doing everything you can to reach out to and respectfully interact with these newcomers to farming communities throughout America? If not, why not?"

These ethnically diverse farmers present opportunities for USDA officials and field workers to serve these new constituents. These farmers may even have new agricultural practices from their ancient cultural heritages that can enrich America's agricultural knowledge. We all need to work together to keep this country's agriculture globally competitive. We need to respectfully include in our outreach programs and communicate with all those who labor to bring food and fiber products to domestic and international tables, no matter what their ethnic background. That is our USDA mandate - to serve all impartially and with high quality delivery of research, education, and extension programs.