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Latino Farmers on the Rise

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There are two significant dimensions to the demographic shift that is currently underway in the United States: 1) the Latino population continues to grow rapidly relative to other population groups, and 2) the White American population is aging and large numbers will soon be leaving the workforce and the economy as active participants. These two dimensions of the demographic shift already are impacting sectors of the economy, including agriculture. As in the general population, Latino farmers are increasing in numbers across the country.

The U.S. Census Bureau has projected that the Latino population will increase to nearly 133 million and comprise 30% of the overall population by 2050. Moreover, Latino children are projected to surpass the number of White children by mid-century. At the same time that this is occurring, the Baby Boomer Generation, which is comprised overwhelmingly of White Americans, will be retiring and entering what is fondly called the "Golden Years." Indeed, in the next two decades, the ratio of seniors (65 years of age and older) to working-age adults (24-64) will double, making more seniors dependent on the productivity of a smaller workforce. Our purpose here is to provide a demographic overview of Latino farmers and identify the challenges or barriers faced by this growing population in obtaining the support and resources needed for continued growth and success. We focus on Latino farmers in Michigan in order to provide concrete examples of the issues confronting this category of farmers. Finally, we identify programs that are working to support Latino farmers across the country. These programs may become sources of important practices that government agencies charged with supporting farmers can learn from and emulate.



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Latino Farmers in the United States

According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), Latinos are the second largest ethnic group of farm operators in the United States, following White Americans, although they comprise only 2.5% of farm operators, up from 2.3% in 2002. Still, according to the 2007 Census of Agriculture, Latino farm operators are one of the fastest growing segments among farmers and ranchers in the country¹. Between 2002 and 2007, Latino operators increased from 72,349 to 82,462, reflecting an increase of 14%, which is twice the 7% growth rate among all farm operators. Native American/Alaskan operators (124%) and women operators had higher growth rates (28.8%) than Latino farm operators. Similarly, Latina operators increased by 30.5%, while Latino (male) operators increased by 9.0%. With regard to principal operators, however, Latinas increased by 32% between 2002 and 2007, while Latino (male) operators increased by 7.3%. In 2002, Latinas comprised 10.1% of all Latino principal operators, and by 2007 they had increased to 12.2%. This is similar to but slightly

¹ Latinos are not the fastest growing segment of farm operators, however, as Native American and Alaskan principal operators increased by 124% between 2002 (15,494) and 2007 (34,706). The figures provided by the USDA in 2002, however, may be inaccurate due to a flaw in the instrument, which contained the Hispanic Origin question at the top of page directly under the heading "Principal Operator or senior partner". USDA officials believe that format may have led to an over count of Hispanic farmers in 2002, with non-Hispanics reacting to the section heading and checking 'yes' on the form without reading closely the text of the Hispanic Origin question.

lower than the 11.2% that women comprised of all principal farm operators in 2002, and the 13.9% they comprised in 2007.

In contrast to operators, the number of Latino farms increased by 10% from 50,592 in 2002 to 55,570 in 2007.² However, between 1982 (16,183) and 2007 (55,570), the number of Latino farms increased by 243%. While the overall number of farm acres across the nation increased by 75,810 acres, Latino farmers lost 3,716,705 acres of farmland, or 18% of their farmland between 2002 and 2007. As might be expected, among Latinos the number of small farms increased, while the number of larger farms decreased. While this pattern also occurs across all farms, a closer look at the breakdown of farm sizes in this category shows there was some growth among the largest farms between 2002 and 2007 (from 77,970 in 2002 to 80,393 in 2007). Overall, the average size of Latino-operated farms in 2007 was 307 acres, as compared to 418 acres across all farms. This is down from the figures in 2002, when the average Latino farm acreage was 410 compared to 441 acres across all farms, and from 1997, when Latino farms (592 acres) were slightly larger than the U.S. average (487 acres). In terms of concentration, Latino farms tend to be located in the states of Texas, California, New Mexico, Florida and Colorado, and Washington. Generally, this parallels the concentration of the Latino population, with the exception of Washington which ranked 12th in terms of Latino population in 2008.



Photo courtesy of <http://mumford-photo.com>

Texas, California and New Mexico are homeland states for Mexican Americans, the largest subgroup within the Latino population. Florida and Washington, however, are not generally considered states with longstanding Latino populations, even if one takes into account the fact that Cuban Americans have been in Florida in increasing numbers since the early 1960s. As with the rest of the nation, however, growth among Latino farmers has been greater outside of the gateway or

homeland states in the Post-IRCA era.³ There is both research and anecdotal evidence that the new Latino farmers may be coming from the migrant streams and from immigrants who are interested in settling out from the migrant streams or in leaving the urban areas with their urban problems. Depending on where the new operators come from, farm ownership is an important opportunity for the predominantly Latino farm labor population interested in using their agriculture experience to make a living as operators.

Another dimension of changes occurring among farmers is the aging of the farming population. The average age of all operators in 2007 was 57.1, up from 55.3 in 2002, and from 50.3 in 1978. The average age of all Latino operators was 53.4 in 2007, up slightly from 52.6 in 2002 (Ibid.). USDA figures show that principal operators 65 years of age and older increased by 18% between 2002 and 2007, at the same time that those under 45 years of age decreased by 21%. This pattern is evident among Latinos as well. Overall, this seems to indicate that current farm youth are opting for less labor intensive non-agriculture opportunities, implying that a scarcity of farmers may loom in the nation's future. In the context of an overall population shift, as with the economy in general, it is the Latino population that may become a significant force in the future of agriculture in the United States.

Farm ownership is relatively unique because of the myriad skills and the long hours of hard work needed to be successful, even if that is measured as "breaking even." Farm workers and immigrants, however, though perhaps accustomed to the work, do not always have the skills needed to manage labor, debt, and production in order to strike out on their own. Although support resources are available in the form of training, they have been historically tailored and accessed primarily by the White population that dominates agriculture in this country. Historically, Latinos have encountered barriers to obtaining access to key resources.

Barriers Facing Latino Farmers

The history of Latinos is replete with instances of institutional discrimination, and that of Latino farmers is no exception. In short, dominant group institutions, through their day-to-day practices, perpetuate and reproduce the subordinate status of Latinos and other minority groups in society. Those who hold power in organizations tend to define positions and hire people who, in general, reproduce the existing organizational structure and purpose. In addition, institutions are made up of, among other things, social networks that are crucial to gaining access to information about opportunities that become available. However, these networks are usually selective and not readily available to people of color, women, and other excluded groups.

²See footnote 1 regarding problems with the count in 2002.

³IRCA is the Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986, which, among other things, provided for the legalization of many undocumented workers in the country.

Finally, the evaluation of candidates and applicants for services and opportunities involve subjective appraisals and decisions which, both with and without an explicit affirmative action plan, reproduces the status quo. This is especially the case in times of nativism, such as the period in which we live today. The upshot is that agencies in charge of key resources and support have been slow to acknowledge Latino farmers' needs.

The major agencies with the responsibility of helping farmers are those of the USDA and the agricultural departments of state governments. The USDA is comprised of several agencies that are organized along seven mission areas: Natural Resources and Environment; Farm and Foreign Agricultural Services, Rural Development; Food Nutrition and Consumer Services; Food Safety; Research, Education and Economics; and Marketing and Regulatory Economics. Included among these agencies is the Cooperative Extension Service, which is a nation-wide non-credit education system established by the Smith-Lever Act of 1914 to work in partnership with the Department of Agriculture and land-grant colleges and universities to provide farmer education, especially in the areas of new agricultural knowledge, practices and technologies. Today it engages in a broader range of activities in the areas of 4-H Youth Development, Agriculture, Leadership Development, Natural Resources, Family and Consumer Services and Community and Economic Development.

Only recently has a body of scholarship begun to emerge that examines the relationship between Extension and communities of color, but this focus has been primarily on African American communities. And while some studies touch on aspects of Latinos and Extension, to date no major study has been conducted on this topic. Nevertheless, the research that is emerging on Extension and African Americans raises some serious questions about its ideologies and organizational cultures. One of the emerging conclusions is that ethnic minorities have had and continue to have limited access to the resources available through the Extension Service and other agencies. Moreover, ethnic minorities have had only limited success in impacting the policies of dominant group institutions, and even when policies have been changed, their implementation has been mixed.

At the same time, many of these agencies have not developed the capacity in terms of knowledge and cultural competence to tailor their programs to the unique needs of Latino and other minority farmers. As a result, Latino farmers have had to rely on themselves and their networks, which may contribute to and perpetuate their isolation from the government agencies. Santos and Castro-Escobar (2009), in a study of Latino blueberry farmers in southwest Michigan, found these farmers rely primarily on "paisano" networks to obtain information about production and marketing. That is, despite the

lack of experience and training, they tend to rely (or are forced to rely) on their own networks as their major sources of information, confining their communities of trust to friends and relatives who also usually lack experience, financial resources and integration in the established farming communities. Among those who are immigrants the problem may be exacerbated by their lack of understanding of and connections to the agencies whose purpose it is to provide services to them (Lopez Ariza and Suvedi, 2009).



Photo courtesy of <http://www.hispanicallyspeakingnews.com>

The lack of these alignments and the resulting dynamics has left Latino farmers out in the fields, so to speak, for decades. More recently, however, inspired by the Pigford Settlement in 1999, in which a class action suit by African American farmers alleging willful discrimination by the USDA agencies (Farm Service Agency in particular) was settled by a consent decree in favor of African American farmers, Latino farmers have sought relief through the courts, as have Native American and women farmers and ranchers.

For several years the USDA has been the focus of federal inquiries into accusations of discrimination through its programs against ethnic minorities and women. Latino farmers allege that the USDA secretly dismantled its civil rights apparatus in the early 1980s and for approximately 15 years did not address the complaints of minority farmers. They further allege that between 1981 and 2000 Latino farmers were denied financial support while such support was provided to White farmers (See Garcia v. Vilsack, 563F. 3d 519).⁴ Interestingly, in 1997, Former Secretary of Agriculture Dan Glickman acknowledged before Congress a long history of discrimination in the USDA's loan programs. More recently, Secretary of Agriculture Tom Vilsack stated that the department has the reputation among some people of being "The Last Plantation," and vowed to lead the department to overcome that reputation. Internal reports by the U.S. Department of Agriculture on civil, congressional

⁴For further information on the Garcia class action efforts see the documents available on-line at: <http://www.garciaclassaction.org/>

hearings, and reports by the Government Accounting Office confirm that the USDA has not effectively addressed discrimination complaints by Latinos and other minorities, and that much remains to be done to eliminate problems. Recently, the Obama administration has sought to address group complaints of discrimination by offering settlements to Hispanic and women farmers.

Michigan Agriculture

Globalization of agriculture production, the growth of agribusiness, urban expansion and an aging farm population have led to the restructuring of agriculture and a slight decline among U.S. farmers. According to the USDA, between 1997 and 2007, national farm numbers and farm acreage decreased by approximately one-half a percentage point, declining by one percent between 1997 and 2002, and then increasing by four percent between 2002 and 2007 (See Table 1 below), despite record commodity prices. Michigan agriculture has remained competitive during this time period, increasing by five percent in the number of farms and actually increasing the value of agriculture production over four percent to become the twentieth highest producing state (up from twenty second in 2002) in terms of value of production.

Michigan remains the leading producer nationwide of red tart cherries, blueberries, cranberries, and black beans. The state is also a significant producer of soybean, corn, dairy products, and livestock. The 73 billion dollar industry is the second largest industry in the state and provides jobs and revenue for many farmers, farm laborers and farm community members.

As one might expect, increased globalization of agriculture production tends to occur at the expense of domestic agriculture. However, an aging domestic farm population also contributes to this decline in agriculture population. While the average age of the American farmer in 2007 was 57.1 years old, in Michigan it was 56.3, with more farmers over 70 years of age than under 35 years of age. This increase in the average operator's age indicates that fewer youths are entering the field. At the same time, the plans of a fifty-seven year old farmer are likely to lean more toward retirement than farm expansion.

Michigan's Latino Farmers

The National Agriculture Statistics Service reports that Latino farm ownership grew 51% between 1997 and 2007. In Michigan, the increase was dramatic, with a 163% increase in Latino owned farms, a 135% increase in acreage and a 114% increase in market value of products sold. In fact, Michigan ranked tenth in the nation for total number of Latino owned farms and exhibited the fifth largest growth in Latino farm ownership in the United States; the largest growth rate among those states with over 150 Latino owned farms. These changes

are summarized in Table 2.

Though Michigan still boasts the highest number of Latino farmers in the Midwest (the nine states with higher Latino farmer populations are in the Southwest and the West), Table 2 shows a 26 percent decline in Latino farm ownership from 2002 to 2007 with a corresponding 61 percent decrease in acreage.⁵ This is in spite of record prices received for farm commodities. A review of Michigan Latino farmer numbers by farm size and years on the farm (Table 3) show the more established, larger farmers left agriculture or were not accounted for in the census. New Latino entrants increased a staggering 162%.

Additionally, a comparison of the average Latino farm to the average Michigan farm highlights demographic differences that may not be recognized or addressed by governmental agencies. According to Buland and Hunt (2001), 93 percent of Latino-owned farms across the country were family owned compared to 90 percent of all Michigan farms. Furthermore, Latino-owned farms are smaller (See Table 3), apparently a result of the influx of new entrants. In fact, the biggest increase (188%) in Michigan Latino-owned farms was in farms with less than 49 acres.



Photo courtesy of <http://www.mainjustice.com>

Barriers to Latinos Farmers in Michigan

Santos and Castro-Escobar (2009) studied the Latino farming community in Southwest Michigan. They identified a lack of knowledge of regulations and resources as a third limiting factor beyond cultural barriers and racism. Lopez Ariza (2007) augments this view by stating that Latino farmers are not a homogeneous group in terms of educational level, language and access to social networks. Programs need to account not only for the cultural differences of the Latino population as a whole but the lack of homogeneity within the population. Malek (2001), who examined Latino farms in Wisconsin, identified a lack of knowledge of regulations and resources as a third

⁵See footnote 1 for possible explanation

limiting factor. However, he adds that language barriers and social isolation have prevented many Latinos from searching out and obtaining resources available to them. Lopez Ariza and Suvedi (2009) provide similar findings through various agencies.

This lack of access to knowledge about production limits the adaptive capacity of the Latino farmer. More recently, Lourdes Martinez Romero (2010) identified the following challenges facing small-scale Latino farmers in Michigan: 1) the majority of them do not receive services from state or federal programs and agencies and are not familiar with NGOs and other community organizations that provide services to farmers; 2) more than 50 percent are in need of financial assistance; and 3) most have limited knowledge of available marketing options and

remain relatively isolated to a single market. As a result of all of these challenges, small-scale Latino farmers in Michigan are struggling for economic survival.

Garcia (2006) states that these challenges identify much of what is needed and relevant to Latino farmers, including the type of operation, the level of education and experience, and cultural considerations. He holds that the information needs of this farm population include sustainable business planning, marketing opportunities and strategies, livestock (cattle, dairy, but also small livestock) production, small fruits (berries) and nuts production, gender and generation issues, and legal and labor issues. Such production knowledge needs, we argue, include pesticide use, food safety and Good Agricultural Practices planning and implementation.

Table 1. Demographic Overview of United States and Michigan Farms over Time

	1997	2002 (% change)	2007 (% change)
U.S. Farm Numbers	2,215,876	2,128,982 (-4%)	2,204,792 (4%)
U.S. Farm Acreage	954,752,502	938,279,056 (-2%)	922,095,840 (-2%)
U.S. Farm Sales (\$1000)	\$201,379,812	\$200,646,355 (-.4%)	\$297,220,491 (48%)
MI Farm Numbers	53,519	53,315 (-.4%)	56,014 (5%)
MI Farm Acreage	10,443,935	10,142,958 (-3%)	10,031,807 (-1%)
MI Farm Sales (\$1000)	\$3,694,670	\$3,772,435 (2%)	5,753,219 (53%)
U.S. Average Farm Operator Age	54	55.3 (2.4%)	57.1 (3%)
MI Average Farm Operator Age	52.8	54.2 (2.6%)	56.3 (4%)

Source: USDA - NASS 2007 Census of Agriculture

Table 2. Latino Farm Characteristics for U.S. and MI for 2002 & 2007

	1997 Value	2002 Value (% change from 1997 census)	2007 Value (% change from 2002 census)
U.S. Hispanic Farm Ownership (Farms)	\$33,450	\$50,592 (51%)	\$55,570 (10%)
MI Hispanic Farm Ownership (Farms)	315	828 (163%)	615 (-26%)
MI Hispanic Farm Ownership (Acreage)	59,368	139,667 (135%)	54,795 (-61%)
MI Hispanic Farm Ownership (Value of Productions) (\$1000)	\$22,244	\$47,553 (114%)	\$40,662 (-15%)

Source: USDA - NASS 2007 Census of Agriculture

Table 3. Years on Farm by Hispanic Farm Operators in U.S. and MI for 2002 & 2007

Years on Present Farm	% Change in All Farm Operators by Years on Farm (2002 to 2007)	% Change in Latino Farm Operators by Years on Farm (2002 to 2007)	% Change in All MI Farm Operators by Years on Farm (2002 to 2007)	% Change in MI Latino Farm Operators by Years on Farm (2002 to 2007)
2 or less	14%	6,174 (23%)	4%	85 (162%)
3 to 4 years	3%	8,994 (12%)	4%	84 (91%)
6 to 9 years	4%	19,609 (11%)	-6%	219 (-3%)
10 or more	-5%	47,485 (8%)	8%	549 (-41%)

Source: USDA - NASS 2007 Census of Agriculture

As a result, the situation calls for more than just routine education – in this case, it must not only be meaningful and interesting, it must take into account the specific cultural and economic positions of the Latino farmers



Photo courtesy of <http://mumford-photo.com>

Latino Farmers and Today's Agriculture

Historically, the Census Bureau has had difficulties accurately counting minority populations, and the Department of Agriculture has developed limited capacity to work effectively with Latino communities in general. For instance, Buland and Hunt (2001) state that the National Resources Conservation Service claims to have served only 30% of the farmers that the Agriculture Census has identified as Latino. There are no data that address the quality of service or the satisfaction levels among those served. They state that anecdotal data indicate that Latino growers are unhappy with the bureaucratic demands of the U.S. Department of Agriculture's agencies and their domineering expert model.

Santos and Castro-Escobar (2009) and others state there is a need for Cooperative Extension to tailor its traditional programming to be more culturally diverse, especially as the traditional White, rural clientele ages and is replaced by farmers from other cultural backgrounds. As an organization becomes culturally diverse, it is better able to recruit diverse staff and to deliver services to diverse clientele.

Swisher, et.al. (2006) reinforce this perspective after examining the relationship between Latino farm operators and a variety of government agencies charged with providing services to farm operators. Extension personnel claim their shortcomings in reaching Latino growers involve time constraints, tight budgets and a lack of communication with this population. Government officials (USDA and its agencies) indicate that many Latino growers are not eligible for their programs, can not meet the paperwork requirements to access the services, and lack knowledge of agency services, which result in the gap between their needs and the programs offered. In general, Swisher, et. al. (2006) blame the Extension professionals' lack of knowledge on the

barriers which limit the delivery of services to Latinos.

Swisher, et.al. (2006) go on to say that Latino farmers indicate it is their lack of knowledge of and inability to access information that precludes them from accessing many program services. Neighboring farmers are unwilling to provide information and agencies such as Extension and the USDA cater to larger farmers and discriminate against smaller Latino farmers. Latino farmers are unfamiliar with credit and optimal production practices, often paying high interest rates and unable to afford the more modern, efficient production tools or learn about efficient productive practices (Swisher, et.al., 2006).

Emerging Practices

Most concerted outreach efforts to Latino farmers are in the southern and western portions of the United States. For example, in a recent multi-million dollar grant allocation from the USDA to help minority farmers, 16 of the 22 organizations applying for and receiving funding were from these regions of the country. The six exceptions were from Hawaii (three), Maine (one), Minnesota (one) and Rhode Island (one). In this section we identify organizations that work specifically with Latino farmers to help them develop capacity as viable agricultural firms and to access services available through dominant institutional agencies. Unfortunately information on effectiveness and success are not currently available, but specialized knowledge is being developed through the experience of working directly with Latino farmers.

Washington State has the Center for Latino Farmers which was established by Rural Community Development Resources. This Center works primarily with Spanish-speaking farm workers in their transition to farm ownership by connecting them to USDA services, providing training workshops, preparing loan packages, and providing one-on-one technical assistance services.

The Southwest Livestock and Farm Association, located in El Paso, Texas, was established by Heifer International. It seeks to enable small and limited-resource immigrant farmers to develop capacity and prosper. This organization focuses on sustainable management practices, helping small farmers integrate livestock into their farm operations while restoring and preserving the land for future generations. The organization supports young and beginning farmers and creates opportunities for new farmers to learn more about farming, ranching, and marketing while preserving the environment.

The Hispanic Farmers and Ranchers Association of America from La Cruces, New Mexico works to help farmers fill out loan applications and National Resource Conservation Service grant applications. It also conducts outreach programs and provides one-on-one technical assistance on the farm.

In Michigan, the Michigan Food and Farming Systems project provides basic educational needs through outreach to family and limited-resource and minority

farmers. This includes training programs on record keeping and other production oriented programming. It has invited the Farm Service Agency to teach farmers about their programs and services, and is interested in developing a manual on how to apply for loans. It offers special programs for Latinos, including training workshops in Spanish, translation of documents, and providing translators at non-Spanish language trainings.

The Multi-Cultural Farmer Mentors program (from 2002 to 2004), a Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education funded project, helped for a time minority farm families by pairing them with successful farmers who could potentially address the particular needs of the struggling and/or beginner minority farmer. It was not sustained, however. Finally, Michigan State University, the state's land grant institution, has some, albeit limited, cultural capacity to support Latino farmers in Michigan.

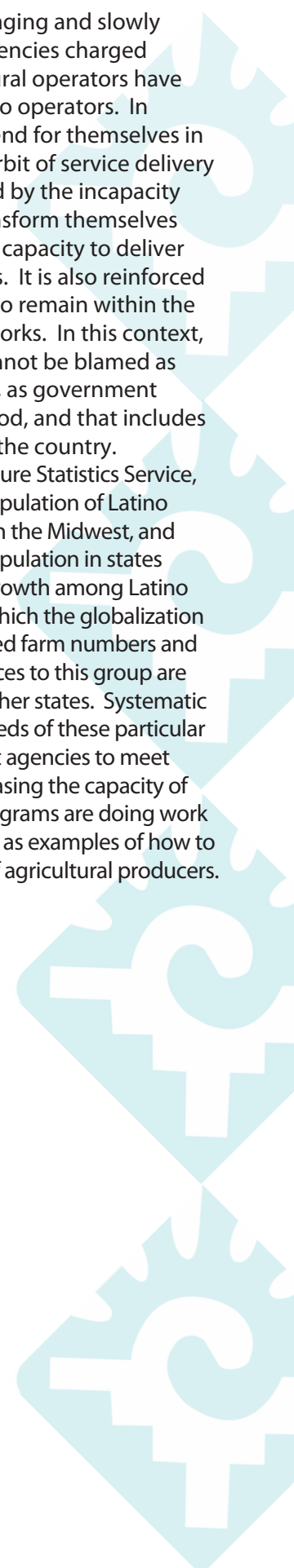
Although our list of program is not exhaustive, it is still fair to say that given the limited number of programs dedicated to providing technical services and assistance to Latino farmers, the development of best practices is, at best, slow going. As the USDA has begun and continues to make funds available to assist "socially disadvantaged farmers" it is expected that some rapid growth will occur in this area, especially given the dearth of specialized knowledge in existence now.

Conclusion

The demographic shift that is occurring across the country is becoming evident among farm and ranch operators, where Latinos are increasing their numbers

relative to White farmers, who are aging and slowly leaving their farms. Historically, agencies charged with providing services to agricultural operators have failed to work effectively with Latino operators. In short, Latino operators are left to fend for themselves in relative isolation and outside the orbit of service delivery systems. This dynamic is reinforced by the incapacity of the dominant institutions to transform themselves into diverse organizations with the capacity to deliver services to different cultural groups. It is also reinforced by the tendency of Latino farmers to remain within the orbit of their own culture and networks. In this context, however, the target population cannot be blamed as agency employees are prone to do, as government agencies are to serve the public good, and that includes the different population groups in the country.

According to the National Agriculture Statistics Service, Michigan boasts the tenth largest population of Latino farm operators, which is the largest in the Midwest, and exhibits the largest growth of this population in states with over 150 Latino growers. This growth among Latino farmers is occurring in a context in which the globalization of agricultural production has reduced farm numbers and acreage. Yet, efforts to provide services to this group are limited and less significant than in other states. Systematic research is needed to identify the needs of these particular growers, the capacity of government agencies to meet those needs, and strategies for increasing the capacity of service providers to do so. Some programs are doing work with Latino farmers which may serve as examples of how to work effectively with this category of agricultural producers.



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