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## **Broadening the Education Infrastructure in Organic Agriculture for Farmers**

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### **Abstract**

Access to high-quality information and continuing education for farmers is essential for them to remain competitive and viable in today's marketplace. The organic sector, while only representing 1 to 2% of the entire US agricultural economy, continues to enjoy growth rates in the range of 16 to 21%, as it has since 1997. Organic agriculture is management intensive, relative to conventional production systems, and requires individuals that are well-trained and proactive and holistic in their management strategies. Many of today's new farmers, whether organic or conventional, are immigrants, ethnic minorities, or otherwise socially disadvantaged. Some of these new farmers are entering the organic sector, yet they are likely not to have access to the necessary information or technical assistance required to make their operation successful, due to language, cultural, and other barriers. This paper explores the current and potential role of producer-targeted organic agriculture programs around the US in building the capacity of new farmers and immigrant and refugee farmers to establish, transition, or strengthen their operation.

### **Introduction**

This paper explores the current and potential role of producer-targeted organic agriculture education programs around the US in building the capacity of new farmers and immigrant and refugee farmers to establish, transition, or strengthen their operations. I postulate that there is a convergence of interests and needs among three producer groups — organic farmers, including those interested in transitioning to organic; new/beginning farmers ([Endnote 2](#), [Endnote 3](#)); and immigrant, refugee, minority, and otherwise socially disadvantaged farmers ([Endnote 4](#)) — and that this convergence represents an important opportunity to further the goals of the three groups.

Based on a preliminary assessment of educational programs around the country that support the development of new and immigrant farmers, the conclusion is reached that there is clearly a predisposition among these programs towards encouraging farmer participants to pursue sustainable production methods (Heifer Project International, ALBA, Land Stewardship Project, Center for Rural Affairs, The Intervale, Growing New Farmers, Southside Community Land Trust, and Grow Alabama, to name a few). Several of these programs offer organic-specific educational programs, while most focus on teaching sustainable agriculture practices. Program participants tend to be diverse in terms of their farming backgrounds, socioeconomic status, and countries of origin. Their very diversity represents fertile ground to further the goals of the organic movement. The organizations that run these educational programs have an opportunity to encourage this

pool of growers to establish their operations as organic, and lay the groundwork for up-and-coming farmers to utilize a systemic, integrated, and conservation-minded decision-making framework in their operations. At the same time they will be taking advantage of the growth in the organic market and consumer demand for local, regional, and sustainably-produced foods.

### **Organic Agriculture and Immigrant Farming on the Rise**

The second half of the 20th century and the onset of the 21st century has witnessed impressive growth in the utilization of organic production systems among farmers, ranchers, market, and home gardeners, and the codification of these practices in private, third-party certification systems, then state, and most-recently federal law. These factors, together with a growth in popularity of organic products among consumers, have largely represented a response to "conventional," chemically-intensive agricultural systems (1,3,27). There is ample evidence that the organic sector is growing and will continue to grow (Box 1).

Box 1. Evidence of growth in the organic sector.

- Expansion of certified organic land: In 1997 certified organic acreage totaled 1,346,558; in 2003, certified organic acreage reached 2,196,874 (33). This represents a 64% increase.
- Retail sales growth from 1.4% to 1.8% of total food sales between 2001 and 2003 (23); organic segment estimated to represent 3.5% of total food sales by 2010 (22).
- Policy development: Establishment of the Organic Caucus in the US House of Representatives in 2002. As of September 2005, caucus has 45 members (25).
- Growth in the availability of research funding specifically for organic agriculture, both through public sources such as the USDA Integrated Organic Program, as well private sources such as the Organic Farming Research Foundation (20,25).
- Public and private funding to support the development of the sector in general, again as evidenced by the establishment and funding of the USDA Integrated Organic Program, as well as by foundation affinity groups such as Funders for Sustainable Food Systems, and Sustainable Agriculture and Food Systems Funders.

At the same time extensive growth is occurring in the organic sector, the larger agricultural industry is experiencing a host of conditions and challenges that may change the face (literally and figuratively) of agriculture in current and future generations (Box 2). Somewhat ironically, these conditions which pose challenges overall to the agricultural industry may in fact pose even greater challenges to the organic sector. Three factors — aging of the farmer population, number of farms decreasing, and farmland being converted to alternative uses — represent threats to the agricultural industry

as a whole. However, two factors — average farm size increasing, and number of farms of less than 10 acres and 10 to 49 acres decreasing — may represent particular obstacles for the continued growth of the organic sector. Organic farms tend to be smaller (9) thus any national trend towards increasing farm size should be cause for investigation. Additionally, the reduction in the number of farms of less than 10 acres and 10 to 49 acres should be of particular concern for organic advocates. If the number of farms in the > 10 acres and 10 to 49 acres categories is decreasing, this suggests that the pool of organic farmers in this size category may also be being squeezed from the marketplace.

Box 2: Context in which organic sector is growing.

- Farmers are getting older and becoming fewer. Farm entry rates have declined, the farmer "replacement" rate has fallen to below 50 percent, there are twice as many farmers over 65 as under 35 years old, nearly half of all farm operators in the US are over 55 years of age, and nearly three-fifths of all farm assets are owned by those 55 and older (29).
- Farms are becoming few in number: There was a nearly 10% decrease in the total number of farms in California between 1997 and 2002, compared with a 4% decrease nationally (30).
- Farmland is being converted to alternative land uses: This is evidenced by reduced acreage in cultivation. Total acreage in agricultural production during the same period dropped 4% in California, compared with a 1.5% decrease nationally (30).
- Average farm size is becoming larger: Average farm size during the 1997-2002 period grew in California from 327 to 347 acres, compared with 431 to 441 nationally (30).
- The number of farms of less than 10 acres and 10 to 49 acres is decreasing rapidly: In California during the same 1997-2002 period, the number of farms of 1 to 9 acres decreased nearly 20%, while the number of farms of 10 to 49 acres decreased approximately 5%. Nationally, the number of 1 to 9 acre farms noted a reduction of about 13%, but interestingly, the number of 10 to 49 acre farms for this period enjoyed an increase of 6%, for the same period (30).

Extraordinary growth in organic retail sales may suggest that much of that growth is occurring at large retail outlets. One recent development that may support this notion is the announcement by WalMart that it plans to double its offerings of organic products (24). This raises the question of whether or not small-scale producers have access to these markets and can participate in their growth. The proliferation of Buy Local/Regional marketing campaigns around the country suggest that consumers are interested in supporting local agriculture. Given the structure of the produce distribution

industry, direct marketing channels (such as farmers markets, farm-to-food service, community supported agriculture, etc.) will likely be the best way for small-scale producers to take advantage of this increased demand for local and organic products. However, there is likely a limit to the amount of produce which can be marketed direct to consumers, especially at volumes and prices that will support farmers long-term. The recommendations section of the paper addresses this issue to some degree.

Despite the seemingly insurmountable challenges associated with small-scale farming in this country, farming remains a dream for many immigrants and minority laborers. According to the 2002 Census of Agriculture (30), minorities, and in particular those of Spanish, Hispanic, or Latino descent, represent one of the few expanding demographic sectors of the US farm population. The 2002 Census of Agriculture offers some hopeful trends for socially disadvantaged farmers. Both at the national level and in California, the numbers of Spanish, Hispanic or Latino (SHL) farm operators have enjoyed significant increases. In California, the number of SHL principal operators increased 45%, from 5,347 in 1997 to 7,771 in 2002. The "All Operator" category in California (Endnote 5), which includes up to three operators per farm, shows 12,083 SHL operators in 2002, representing nearly 10% of Total Operators in the state. Nationally, SHL principal operators grew 51% for the same period, while the All Operators category registered 72,329, representing only 2% of Total Operators nationwide. It cannot be assumed that the SHL category represents solely, or even a majority of immigrants. Rather it denotes origin, but does not clarify the generation which emigrated. This clarification is important because in many parts of the southwestern US there are farm operators who classify themselves as SHL, but who are not immigrants. The Census of Agriculture does not identify immigrant status of operators (18).

These Census of Agriculture figures paint an alarming picture of US agriculture in which small farms (whether categorized by size or farm sales) are decreasing in numbers, yet farm operators of Spanish, Hispanic, or Latino descent, those most likely to operate small farms, are increasing. Compared with other demographic groups, Hispanic farmers have a higher proportion of "very small farms" (less than \$10,000 Farm Sales) and a high proportion of "small farms" (less than \$250,000 Farm Sales). The share of high-value specialty crops produced by Hispanic farmers is much higher than for US farms. Only 12% of Hispanic farmers specialized in traditional commodity crops such as corn and grain (30). Under these conditions, what might the future hold for small, limited-resource, socially disadvantaged and beginning farmers in California and the US? Are they entering a particular sector of an industry that is only destined to contract? Small and immigrant farm advocates believe that strategic market positioning, with an eye towards developing niches, may be the path offering the most promise for small and organic farmers.

### **Barriers to Entry and Success**

All of this growth in the organic sector and among new immigrant farmers may lead one to believe that barriers to their establishment and success have fallen. Interestingly, many of the issues that immigrant, new, and organic farmers must deal with are similar in nature, suggesting that economies of scale may be achieved by providing some sort of consolidated, or at least coordinated, service delivery. There certainly are differences among these groups which warrant specialization of support schemes, as evidenced by the emergence of Growing New Farmers (regional Northeast), as well as the National Immigrant Farming Initiative (national network of immigrant farming projects or IFPs), both discussed below. While there does not appear

to be a precise equivalent for organic farmers beyond local efforts, the Organic Farming Research Foundation (OFRF) and the Organic Trade Association (OTA) nationally, as well as state-based certifiers and local programs such as Marin Organic in California, fill this advocacy and information diffusion role. Recently, OFRF announced the establishment of the Organic Farmers Action Network (OFAN). OFRF's goal for this network is to keep organic advocates informed about federal policy issues that directly affect organic farmers, and provide educational tools about how to effectively get involved. This new effort has the potential to build a stronger national network of organic agriculture advocates and experts (26).

ALBA has conducted a series of needs assessments with new and limited-resource farmers, largely of Hispanic origin. Farmers interviewed report that government and university sources of information and technical assistance are often not appropriate for various reasons (including language, cultural appropriateness, or financial) for their particular needs and conditions. There are enormous obstacles which these farmers face, as evidenced by their responses to surveys and interviews (2,5,16). These findings confirm what others have found, as described in Box 3.

Box 3. Obstacles to the success of Hispanic farmers.

- Limited access to training in effective farming techniques;
- lack of technical assistance and experience in management and marketing, crucial to survival and success in farming;
- language barriers and cultural differences which limit Spanish-speaking farm workers' ability to participate in vital skills training programs;
- low confidence and ability to seek alternative marketing channels, financing options, or access existing farmer networks;
- limited exposure to sustainable agriculture production information;
- extremely limited support systems through which farm workers can gain confidence in developing alternative career plans, leadership skills, and solving common problems;
- difficulties in securing credit, opening and maintaining bank accounts;
- lack of financial literacy (ability to read, analyze, manage, and communicate about the personal financial conditions that affect material well-being);
- lack of understanding and access to agricultural risk management concepts and tools;
- a marketing and financing system which tends to protect the interests of brokers, middlemen,

wholesalers, and larger-scale producers, leaving these limited-resource farmers to bear the brunt of fluctuations in the market; and

- a lack of trust, stakeholder inclusion, and reciprocity between and among Hispanic farmers and government agencies and agricultural technical assistance organizations.

Agricultural programs and service providers such as USDA, Extension agencies, credit providers, and growers' organizations require a greater awareness and understanding of immigrant farming issues in order to provide new immigrant farmers with ongoing support services as they work towards economically viable operations. Immigrants who farm need better access to established agriculture programs, regulatory services, viable markets, agricultural education, and financial assistance. Language, cultural differences, and education are impediments to such access, as are policies and programs at the federal, state, and local levels that influence support for such services (11). Table 1 summarizes the barriers to entry and success for immigrant/refugee farmers, new farmers, and organic farmers. The table illustrates the fact these three types of farmers have some commonalities in terms of their barriers to entry and success. Overcoming barriers to entry is not an identical process for any two farmers. However, the common needs, experiences, relative sizes, and market focus among organic, immigrant, and new farmers may lend themselves to a pedagogy which builds community across racial, ethnic, and social lines by targeting this broad audience. Training and education programs should be designed to result in diverse and active farmer networks.

Table 1. Barriers to entry and/or success.

<b>Immigrant/Refugee Farmers (11)</b>	<b>New Farmers (8)</b>	<b>Organic Farmers (15)</b>
Agricultural and technical competency		Limited availability of production information
		Limited availability of market information
Access to resources for small farmers, Agricultural Support Services	Access to information and education	Limited access to production information
		Limited access to market information
		Training in management systems
Access to credit and capital	Access to financial support	Cost of conversion-related investments
Access to land	Access to land	
Access to markets	Access to markets	
Racial and cultural discrimination		
Immigration history and emotional well being		

### Small Farm Renaissance

In an environment of budget cuts and increasing demand for the products which these farmers produce, there is a clear need for greater outreach and technical assistance to this audience, a need which is simply not met through traditional extension services. The emergence and growth of support systems, educational programs and government funding for new and immigrant farmers can be seen at least in part as a response to the changing demographics described above. Consider the following:

In 1981, Secretary of Agriculture Bob Bergland issued his report, *A Time to Choose*, in which he warned that "... unless present policies and programs are changed so that they counter, instead of reinforce or accelerate the trends towards ever-larger farming operations, the result will be a few large farms controlling food production in only a few years" (Endnote 6). Despite this warning, at the time the USDA National Commission on Small Farms released its report: *A Time to Act* (32), the plight of small farmer in the US had only worsened. Perhaps in spite of this adversity, the efforts of new, immigrant, sustainable, and organic farmers, as evidenced by the above statistics and demographics, have succeeded in carving out a niche for themselves.

Certainly, the recommendations of the National Small Farms Commission played a part in making the 2002 Farm Bill one of great importance for small farmers, in which the Beginning Farmer and Rancher Development Program was created. Unfortunately this program has never received any funding, despite the well-demonstrated need. Advocates for new/beginning, socially disadvantaged farmers are now working to influence policy blueprints that are being developed as part of preparations for the 2007 Farm Bill debate. Given the multiple benefits provided by small-scale organic agriculture to society, including economic development and environmental protection, there is a significant amount of convergence among the interests of these farmers and other sectors, such as rural development. Capitalizing on this convergence to achieve serious policy wins will be important in reversing the trends affecting small farms, and expressed so ominously in the titles of the above referenced USDA reports: *A Time to Choose*; and *A Time to Act*. If not, the next report might be titled *The Time has Passed*.

### Local/Regional Food System Renaissance

There is a resurgence taking place in small-scale, sustainable and direct market-oriented, specialty crop agriculture. Fueling this interest in the pursuit of farming as a career, is the interest of a much larger population in supporting, benefiting from, and accessing local and regional food production. New policies are promoting and facilitating institutional purchases of locally produced fresh food; aims of such policies are to improve health of target audiences such as school children, and to contribute to the economic viability of local producers (13). Food policy councils are surfacing all over the country as tools to achieve multiple goals associated with agriculture, nutrition, economic development, and land use (6). The food service industry is following the lead of upscale restaurants in "doing well by doing good," featuring (sometimes exclusively) locally and sustainably-produced foods on their menus. An example of this is the September 29, 2005 "Eat Local Challenge" organized by Bon Appetit Management Company (4). The challenge offered 150,000 diners at 190 corporate, university, and museum restaurants from Seattle to Washington, DC the opportunity to eat a 100% locally-grown meal, made entirely of ingredients from within 150 miles of the kitchen where they are served. Regional branding is another strategy farmers are using to capitalize on the interest of consumers to support small, sustainable, and local farmers.

### Support Networks

Similar to industry groups that aim to support businesses in their sector, the following groups are examples of efforts to support new and immigrant farmers, and especially those organizations and individuals that provide services to this farmer audience.

**New farmers.** Growing New Farmers (GNF) is a regional initiative to provide future generations of Northeast farmers with the support and expertise they need to succeed. GNF brings together service providers from across the Northeast who are committed to working with and advocating for new and beginning farmers from Maine, Vermont, New Hampshire, Massachusetts, Rhode Island, Connecticut, New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Maryland, Delaware, and West Virginia.

**Immigrant farmers.** The National Immigrant Farming Initiative (NIFI), a project of Heifer Project International, supports the establishment of immigrant farmers and "Immigrant Farming Projects" around the country (7). The initiative was launched in part based on the increasing number of requests for assistance Heifer received from a variety of immigrant farmer groups, indicating that many immigrants are interested in developing their



own farming enterprises. Heifer and other NIFI partners determined that immigrant farming activity is poorly documented and remains largely hidden to many government agencies and other farm programs, and to food and agriculture policy making in general (11). This is certainly changing, as NIFI has been around now for more than two years, and member IFPs are working to raise the level of awareness of this demographic group among other service providers.

To help address these and the many other challenges confronting immigrant farmers, groups around the country have organized Immigrant Farming Projects (IFPs). In Massachusetts, the New Entry Sustainable Farming Project (20; H. Joseph, *personal communication*), as well as a private landowner that serves as a mentor farmer (M. Moreira, *personal communication*), assists dozens of Southeast Asian and African families to farm and market commercially, combining enterprise and whole farm approaches. Greenmarket and Cornell Cooperative Extension's New Farmer Development Project in New York City uses multiple approaches to link Latino immigrants to the area's farms and to its network of farmers' markets, offering employment, training opportunities, education, and technical assistance (M. Moreira, *personal communication*). The Glover Organic Farm, near Atlanta, Georgia, provides farmland and resources to low-income, Asian families (including Korean, Laotian, Cambodian, and Vietnamese) for raising traditional crops and helps these families market excess produce in farmers' markets scattered throughout Atlanta (S. Glover, *personal communication*).

Programs targeting beginning, immigrant, and organic farmers are identified in Table 2. This is not an exhaustive list, but attempts to provide some geographic diversity. Of the 16 programs listed, 14 have an explicit or obvious focus on organic and sustainable production systems, based on reviews of promotional literature, websites, as well as personal communications with project staff. These programs and others like them are providing essential information, training, and technical assistance to farmers. Collaboration among projects that serve a specific farmer audience (beginning, immigrant, organic) has the potential to strengthen broader efforts to incorporate a sustainable and organic focus to farmer education programs.

Table 2. Education and support programs by type of producer.

Program	Beginning	Immigrant	Organic	Sustainable ag focus
<a href="#">ALBA</a> (CA)	X	X	X	X
<a href="#">CSA Learning Center</a> at Angelics Organics (IL)	X	X	X	
<a href="#">Intervale</a> (VT) (12)	X		X	X
New Entry <a href="#">Sustainable Farming Project</a> (MA) ( <a href="#">Endnote 7</a> )		X		X
New Farmer Development Project (NY) <a href="#">Council on the Environment of New York City</a> ( <a href="#">Endnote 8</a> )		X		X
<a href="#">Center for Lation Farmers</a> (WA)		X		
Farm Beginnings (MN+) <a href="#">Land Stewardship Project</a> (14)	X			X
<a href="#">Grow Alabama</a>	X		X	X
<a href="#">New Farm</a>	X	X	X (FarmSelect Transition to Organic)	X
<a href="#">Minnesota Food Association</a>	X	X	X	X
<a href="#">Southside Community Land Trust</a> (CT)	X	X	X	X
New Immigrant Farm Program, UMN/Center for <a href="#">Rural Design</a>	X	X		X
Southeast <a href="#">Immigrant Farm Partners</a> (GA)	X	X	X	X
<a href="#">Clallam County Sustainable Farming Program</a> (WA)		X		X
Washington State University <a href="#">Small Farms</a> Team	X	X		X
<a href="#">Marin Organic</a> (CA)			X	X
Small Farm Resource & Training Center (CA)	X	X		

**Organic farm incubator.** An organic farm incubator is a relatively new term, referring to a concept which attempts to approximate the goals of a traditional business incubator. Similar to a traditional business incubator, an organic farm incubator is a business support process that accelerates the successful development of start-up and fledgling organic farmers by providing entrepreneurs with an array of targeted resources and services (17). Incubators of any sort of business offer services such as provision of management guidance, technical assistance, and consulting tailored to young growing companies.

Incubators usually also provide clients access to appropriate rental space and flexible leases, shared basic business services and equipment,

technology support services, and assistance in obtaining the financing necessary for company growth (28).

There are hundreds of examples of business incubators – both "bricks and mortar" and virtual. Examples of organic farm incubators in the US, which require a sizeable land base, are very few in number. Based on research conducted for this paper, evidence suggests there are many other individuals and organizations that are providing some of the services of an incubator, perhaps just not in a comprehensive way. Lists that include these efforts are most likely available regionally, through the NIFI regional networks, Extension, and others in the agricultural community.

At this time, ALBA (CA), Intervale (VT), the Farm Business Incubator Program of Southside Community Land Trust (CT), and the Grow Alabama Organic Farm Incubator Program are the only explicit and functioning organic farm incubator programs that I have been able to identify to date.

Box 4. Elements of ALBA's Organic Farm Incubator.

- PEPA graduates can farm ½ to 5 acres of ALBA land for up to four years.
- Lease rates increase from subsidized to near-market rates over four-year period.
- Fee-based access to water, equipment, post-harvest and cooling infrastructure.
- Personalized technical assistance in production, business planning, and marketing.

**Marketing support is key to farm incubation.** Groups of farmers that have banded together to access markets are pursuing Collaborative Marketing Schemes. In many cases the markets being pursued are institutional markets. One entity usually serves as the distributor of record for the institution purchasing produce, and serves the function of consolidating product from many farmers. Despite the challenges of developing such schemes, their value cannot be understated, both for the farmers and the buyers, since it allows farmers to access institutional markets and provides institutions access to food grown by family farmers. These types of marketing schemes offer hope in expanding farm-to-institution (school, college, hospital, etc.) marketing efforts, as described above.

Examples of such efforts include the Monterey Bay Organic Farming Consortium and ALBA Organics, which together services the University of California Santa Cruz, Stanford University, Asilomar Conference Grounds (owned by concessionaire Delaware North Company), Sutter Maternity, and Surgery Center and Dominican Hospital. The California Growers Collaborative serves Ventura County school districts and has its sights set on other regional school districts and institutional markets. The Red Tomato ([redtomato.org](http://redtomato.org)), based in Massachusetts, serves a similar function, pooling product from farmers all over the eastern region of the US, delivering it to buyers that value sustainably-produced foods that have been grown by family farmers. Yet another example is Access Organics ([accessorganics.com](http://accessorganics.com)), which serves markets nationwide with organic product grown by independent family farmers.

## Recommendations and Conclusion

Much progress has been made over the past two decades in advancing the goals of the organic agriculture movement. Immigrant and minority farmers are entering the organic sector, as evidenced by the programs described in this paper. Outreach and education programs that target minority farmers tend to have a bias towards sustainable and organic production systems. However, the true impact of such programs is largely unknown. In addition, existing conventional agriculture programs have generally not been effective at integrating a sustainable and organic component. The following recommendations attempt to address some of these issues.

1. Effective marketing is one of the essential elements to the success of any farmer. Marketing can be a significant barrier to entry and success for beginning, minority, and immigrant farmers, largely due to lack of information, as well as cultural and language barriers, and access to capital. Research into and support for collective and cooperative marketing schemes that facilitate the consolidation of product from multiple farmers and its sale into institutional and wholesale markets should be pursued by the USDA. In many cases farmers can organize themselves for collective marketing purposes. However, if information, culture, language, or access to capital are barriers, it might not be enough for farmers to organize themselves. They may benefit from the support of an organization such as those mentioned above in the previous section. The USDA should help determine what role such organizations can play in supporting the marketing efforts of farmers, and how USDA can support those organizations more effectively.
2. Coordinated, outcomes-based program evaluation should be developed for all programs (public and private) that aim to educate producers about organic agriculture, with the goal of determining "the extent to which producer-targeted organic education programs have succeeded in helping participants to successfully transition to (and remain) organic, and/or improve the viability of their existing organic operations". An example of a similar evaluation effort can be found in the report entitled *USDA Programs: What do we know about their effectiveness in improving the viability of small farms?*, produced by the Henry A. Wallace Center for Agricultural & Environmental Policy at Winrock International that explored the degree to which USDA programs that aim to support small farmers actually do have a positive impact on small farmers. Their research explored three questions: (i) Does the program intend (either explicitly or implicitly) to support small farms? (ii) Has an evaluation been done of the program's effect on small farms? (iii) If an evaluation has been done, what does it show as to the effectiveness of the program? (10)
3. USDA-funded organic extension agents should exist in all counties, much like the Marin County model, to facilitate knowledge transfer generated by research institutions into on-the-ground know-how for farmers. Where these already exist, they are often the same extension agents that serve small and immigrant farmers.
4. NRCS staff should be trained in organic pest management and organic fertility management so they can provide good, sound advice to farmers, in the context of whole-farm conservation planning. Currently it is extremely difficult to obtain organic-specific advice from NRCS agents.

5. Organic practices should be incorporated into NRCS approved practices so that NRCS resource conservation strategies can capitalize upon growth in the organic sector.
6. Membership of USDA Advisory Committee on Beginning Farmers and Ranchers should be expanded to include individuals that represent (aspiring/beginning) immigrant and organic farming interests and organizations.
7. An organic-focused research agenda should be developed and prioritized by USDA and all of its dependent agencies and offices. This agenda should take into consideration the role of the immigrant and minority farmer in the organic sector, and in particular, the non-monetary value they provide to society.

This paper, while a work in progress, generally represents the current perspective within the sustainable and organic agriculture community regarding the role of beginning and immigrant/minority farmers in the organic sector. The author works at the intersection of sustainable and organic agriculture, economic development, and social justice. Any errors or omissions are solely the responsibility of the author.

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### Endnotes

- 1 The author is currently Executive Director of the Agriculture & Land Based Training Association (ALBA), member of the Board of Directors of California FarmLink, member of the Coordinating Council of the Sustainable Agriculture Coalition/Midwest Sustainable Agriculture Working Group, and member of the Steering Committee of the National Immigrant Farming Initiative. These organizations provide a range of services directly to farmers and to service

- providers that further the interests of new/beginning farmers, immigrant farmers, as well as sustainable and organic farmers. [Back to text.](#)
2. According to the Growing New Farmers Consortium, a "new" farmer is someone who is considering starting/developing, is starting/developing a farm business, or has been farming for 10 years or less (8). [Back to text.](#)
  3. The USDA defines a "beginning farmer" as someone who has never operated a farm or ranch, or who has less than 10 years experience managing an agricultural operation (33). [Back to text.](#)
  4. In this paper I will refer to this subset of farmers collectively as socially disadvantaged farmers. [Back to text.](#)
  5. 2002 was the first year this category existed, thus there is no comparative data. [Back to text.](#)
  6. A Time to Choose: Summary Report on the Structure of Agriculture. USDA. Washington, DC. January 1981. p. 142. [Back to text.](#)
  7. As of this writing, project staff are participating in the NorthEast Organic Network (NEON) 2005 Advanced Training in Organic Crop Production, with the aim of providing this training to program participants in the future. [Back to text.](#)
  8. Ibid. [Back to text.](#)