

Hispanic Farmers in Wisconsin

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Summary: Census of Agriculture data for Wisconsin show a variable number of Hispanic farm operators across the ten year span represented by census years 1997, 2002, 2007. While large numbers were reported for the 2002 census year relative to the numbers reported for 1997 and 2007, agricultural agents associated with the University of Wisconsin Extension and other agricultural professionals were not aware of the whereabouts of many Hispanic operators. This project utilized a variety of methodologies to locate Hispanic farm operators and to learn more about their characteristics, information needs, and environmental management practices. Our findings indicate that Wisconsin's Hispanic farm operators are characterized by diversity of operation, origin, and experience with farming. We did not locate any clusters – either geographically or by type of operation – where Hispanic operators are more likely to be found. First and second generation Hispanic farm operators, and those who have married into established Wisconsin farming families, experience challenges similar to other farmers in the state. Immigrant farmers experience a wider range of challenges and are more poorly served by agricultural institutions and agencies. The report details characteristics of farmers, challenges experienced, and information needs.

The research detailed in this paper is part of a larger project “Effective Outreach for Wisconsin’s Women and Hispanic Farmers.” The research is funded by the North Central Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education Grant program and conducted by staff at the Environmental Resources Center of the University of Wisconsin-Madison. For more information on this project, please see the web site above or contact Sharon Lezberg, Project Coordinator, at slezberg@wisc.edu.

Overview and Background

The goal of our project was to propose effective outreach strategies to reach the Hispanic farm population in Wisconsin. To this end, we identified several objectives to the research:

- (1) ground-truth agricultural census data to determine if census numbers were accurate,
- (2) understand the gap in provision of Extension services to Hispanic farmers,
- (3) gain a better understanding of Hispanic farm operators in Wisconsin,
- (4) document constraints, resource and information needs, and environmental management practices of these farmers, and
- (5) make recommendations on how UWEX could better serve these farmers.

Wisconsin's agricultural census showed a marked increase in the number of Hispanic farmers (principal operators) from 1997 to 2002 (from 308 to 523, a 70% increase), while 2007 census data indicated a significant decrease in the number of principal operators (245 down from 523, a 53% decline from 2002 to 2007). The reported census numbers for 1997 and 2007 show less variation than these years compared to 2002. If these two census years are compared, the numbers indicate a 20% decrease in Hispanic farm operators during the decade from 1997 to 2007.

Discussions with agricultural Extension educators highlighted a gap in service to minority populations, as few UWEX agriculture agents had any contact at all with the Hispanic farming population, outside of farm laborers.

Our research attempted to determine the reasons for this gap in service provision. We hypothesized that there could be any of several reasons to explain this gap : (1) that the population was smaller than 2002 census numbers indicated, (2) that Hispanic farm operators were farming 'below the radar' and were not seeking assistance from UWEX or other state sources of support, (3) that the Hispanic farming population was dispersed and hard to identify or reach, or (4) that language and/or cultural barriers impeded the ability of Extension educators to reach this population.

Methods

We used several methods to identify and learn about Hispanic farmers:

- (1) Survey of those farmers who reported that they were of Hispanic origin and a principle farm operator in the agricultural census: We mailed a short survey to these operators through a modified Dilman survey technique, where each potential respondent received 4 contacts from us (preliminary letter, first survey with letter, reminder postcard, and second survey with letter). The survey was mailed by the Wisconsin Agricultural Statistics Service (WASS), thus ensuring confidentiality of survey respondents;
- (2) Contact with agricultural extension agents and agricultural professionals: we sent queries to agricultural professionals seeking information on whether they were working with Hispanic clients;
- (3) In-depth regional searching: Our outreach worker, Ms. Julia Reyes-Hamann, traveled to nine Wisconsin counties where census numbers showed a relatively high number of Hispanic farmers. In these counties, Ms. Reyes-Hamann contacted Extension agents, Hispanic community leaders, meat processing plants, milk plants, and Hispanic food markets. Brochures were left at various community centers;
- (4) Analysis of land records lists for 7 counties: We selected land owners who had five or more acres in agriculturally zoned areas. Ms. Reyes-Hamann contacted people on the lists who had Hispanic sounding names;
- (5) Outreach to the Hispanic community: We printed an article in one Spanish language paper and attended Hispanic cultural events.
- (6) Interviews: From our surveys, county lists, and visits, we identified 25 individuals who were interviewed by Ms. Reyes-Hamann for a more in-depth understanding of their farming practices.

General survey information

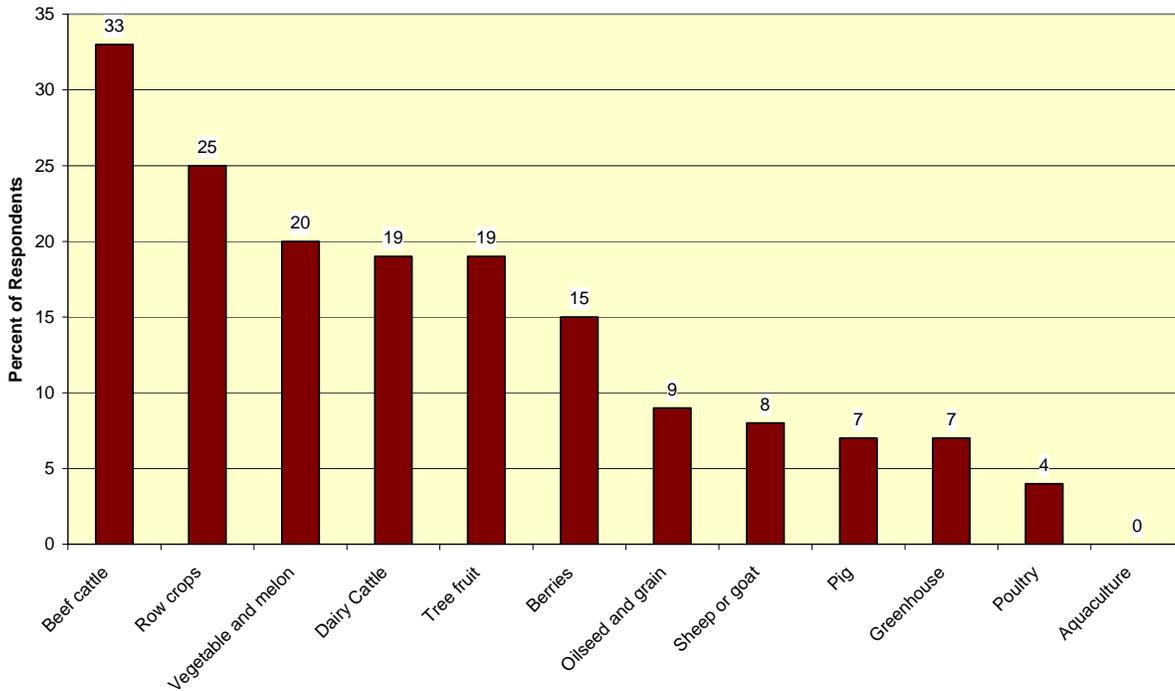
Sample size and response rate: 215 surveys were sent out through WASS between October-December, 2008, to all those individuals in their database from 2002 and 2007 Ag. Census who reported that they were Hispanic and that they were the primary operator of a farm. Of these, 104 were returned (48% response rate). We used a modified Dilman survey technique, where each potential respondent received 4 contacts from us (preliminary letter, first survey with letter, reminder postcard, second survey with letter). This frequency of contact improves response rate, as respondents are reminded of our interest, and encouraged to participate with ease of reply.

In an attempt to maximize response rate, we purposefully kept our survey short. Consequently, there are many important questions that were not asked, and our analysis is limited due to the brevity of the survey. A limitation of our survey is that we do not have demographic/historical data on the population of respondents, so we do not know how long the respondent has been farming, their percent of Hispanic heritage, their country of origin, or the number of years residence in the United States.

Type of Farm Operation

Survey respondents were asked to check each category that applied (categories are listed below, in the bar graph that follows). The categories with the greatest number of farmers are beef cattle operations, row crops, or 'other' enterprises (see graph below for categories). 'Other' is not included in the graph, as it represents a variety of different enterprises. 'Other' includes: Hay production (x2), Christmas trees (x3), grapes (x2), CRP (x3), horses (x4), clay/wood/willow crafts, small organic operation, maple syrup, corn and soybeans, llamas and alpacas, bean and corn for grain and wheat, custom heifers, forage crop, honey bees, bison, prairie/wildlife foods plots/trees.

**Wisconsin Hispanic Farm Operators
by type of operation**



Categories of Information Desired

Survey respondents were asked the question “Do you want any information or training on the following topics?” The topics were general categories, rather than specific training areas. While there was no clear topic for which the bulk of farmers wanted information, three categories (sustainable or organic farming practices, environmental improvement and conservation, and marketing) receive higher percent ‘yes’ responses. Note that all topics suggested received less than 40% ‘yes’ responses.

Topics for which information is desired	Percent Yes
Sustainable or organic farming practices	37
Environmental improvement and conservation	35
Marketing	35
Crop production methods	30
Animal husbandry	27
Financial record keeping	22
Legal issues	22

Information sources

Survey respondents were asked four questions regarding their information needs and preferred means of getting information. Respondents were asked: “During the past year, did you consult with any of the following people or organizations when making decisions about your farm?” Of all sources of information listed, survey respondents reported that they tended to consult other growers or farmers for information more than other sources, followed by farm supply dealers or producer coops.

Sources of Information: People Consulted	Percent Yes
Other growers or farmers	64
Farm supply dealers or producer coops	49
United States Farm Service Agency (FSA)	41
Bankers, financial consultants, or private paid consultants	31
Grower Association or Farmer Organization	30
University of Wisconsin Cooperative Extension	28
United States Land and Water Conservation Service	24
Your State Department of Agriculture	20
United States Natural Resources Conservation Service	17

Print/Other Media for Information

Access to information is critical in a field such as farming, where farmers need to be well versed on a wide range of topics, from agronomy and animal husbandry to marketing and regulations. We asked survey respondents “Do you use any of the following to find information regarding your farm?” Our findings indicate that farm magazines or newspapers are the primary source of information for the majority of Hispanic farmers (and this is consistent with other farmers), but that use of the internet is also widely used for finding information for the farm operation.

Printed Sources of Information	Percent Yes
Farm magazine or newspaper	70
Internet	60
Radio	49
Television	47
Local newspaper	46
University of Wisconsin Extension publications	42
Field days and demonstrations	39
Conference or workshop	33
Product promotion materials	33

Use of Internet

To understand how farmers are using the internet, we asked: “Listed below are internet-based ways to receive farm-related information. Would you use any of them?” We found that the traditional format of information summary sheets or full reports was still the preferred method to receive information.

Preferred Information Delivery Method – Internet specific	Percent Yes
Information Summary Sheet or full reports	43
Training modules	34
Power Point or slideshow	30

Video presentation (YouTube)	28
Interactive on-line class	28
Audio presentation	24

General interview information

Interviews with Hispanic farmers provided rich portraits of selected individuals. Our interview sample included 16 immigrant farmers, 3 first generation farmers, and 6 second generation farmers. There was great diversity in the type of operation that these individuals managed, although all would qualify as small farms. Interviewees were asked general questions about their farms and their path into farming, marketing strategies, environmental management issues, how they got information, and challenges or barriers they faced.

Individuals followed various paths into farming. We identified the following different ways in which interviewees got into farming (followed by the number of individuals)

1. Hispanic woman marries a man from a traditional farm family (7)
 - Hispanic man marries into farm family (1)
 - Hispanic parent married into farm family (2)
2. Farmers works/worked at another job, then buys land (4)
3. Primary work as agricultural consultant/researcher, farming part time (3)
4. Sponsor or partner's family lets grower use land for vegetables (3)
5. Dairy herdsman/foreman becomes employer's partner (1)
6. Dairy herdsman buys heifers in order to own share in farm (1)
7. Dairy herdsman raises steer on employer's farm (1)
8. Land managed in forest (2)

While we anticipated that many of Wisconsin's Hispanic farmers were from Mexico, we were surprised by the wide diversity in country of origin. Of the immigrant farmers (where the individual interviewed was born in another country and subsequently immigrated to the U.S., even if this immigration occurred many years ago), 8 out of 16 were from Mexico. Others were from Columbia, Dominican Republic, Argentina, Puerto Rico, Bolivia, and Brazil. First and second generation farmers were from Mexico (7 out of 9), Puerto Rico, and Cuba.

Discussion

Wisconsin's Hispanic farmers are characterized by diversity – in farm operation, country of origin, path into farming, and other aspects of the farming operation. We did not identify any clusters of farmers, either geographically or in type of farming operation. Of the farmers we interviewed, several farm challenges were predominant: capitalization (access to loans), profitability, and marketing.

Immigrant farmers cited several additional, unique challenges (i.e., different from 1st and 2nd generation Hispanic farmers, and from the farming population in general), including: lack of knowledge and experience in farming, language barriers, culture shock, lack of a drivers' license, not knowing who to go to for assistance, and difficulty understanding regulations. Some immigrant farmers reported having a more difficult time finding information pertinent to their farming operations and services to support their enterprises. Additionally, several of these farmers tended to operate outside of formal channels and expressed lack of familiarity with Extension and other farm services. Many lived in areas where there was no solidly defined Hispanic community, and they reported limited networks of social capital. The farmers we interviewed tended to be risk-takers, but their farming businesses were, in general, not well planned out.

Extension educators can provide assistance to Hispanic farmers by developing education programs on how to procure loans (working with FSA and ag. lenders), business planning for profitability, marketing options, understanding regulations, and gaining familiarity with government agencies and sources of assistance. These programs should be offered either in Spanish or with Spanish translation.

While the Hispanic farming population is currently not large, we anticipate that it will grow in future years with two potential new groups of entering farmers. First, the urban Hispanic (non-farm) population has been steadily increasing in Wisconsin, and there is evidence of interest in community gardening and direct market vegetable production among this population. Second, the Wisconsin dairy industry, at present, is heavily dependent on immigrant labor, and the number of Hispanic dairy workers has increased significantly over the last ten years. These workers have gained critical skills in animal husbandry and other aspects of dairy farm operations. We anticipate that urban Hispanic residents and/or immigrant dairy farm workers may contribute to the next wave of future farmers, particularly if there is national immigration reform. The challenge for Extension and other government agencies will be to be ready to assist these future farmers with information, services, and financing when that time comes.

Based on our interview results and analysis, we feel that Extension can be better positioned to support Hispanic farm enterprises now and in the future. We offer the following recommendations:

- 1) Increase our understanding and awareness, as educators, of how Hispanic residents are participating in agriculture (either as a farm operator, a farm laborer, or in other parts of the food system).
- 2) Recognize the differences (in opportunities and constraints) between immigrant farmers and 1st or 2nd generation Hispanic farmers.
- 3) Be aware of how immigration issues might affect farmers, gardeners, or farm workers.
- 4) Seek out immigrant farmers and develop one-on-one relationships with them.
- 5) Provide one-on-one technical assistance, and where necessary, work through a translator.
- 6) Target outreach and educational programs to smaller scale farms.
- 7) Target assistance to urban gardeners.
- 8) Utilize the Hispanic press and radio stations to deliver information in Spanish.
- 9) Provide information sheets to farm supply dealers and FSA offices in Spanish, and seek assistance from these enterprises and organizations to distribute farming information.
- 10) Provide farming information on the internet through web sites that are easily accessible to Hispanic farmers seeking this information.