

Evaluating Farmers Market Opportunities for Southeast Asian Growers in Sacramento County

The Mien and Hmong farmers of the Sacramento Valley grow unique varieties of Southeast Asian vegetables that are in high demand as well as strawberries known for their taste. Yet Southeast Asian growers tend to be poorly represented at farmers markets in Sacramento. This study assessed Southeast Asian growers' participation at farmers markets and identified barriers and potential opportunities for inclusion in farmers markets. Researchers interviewed Southeast Asian growers to find out where they currently sell their produce and what would help them expand their market. Regional farmers market managers, flea market managers, grocery stores, chefs, and other buyers were also interviewed in-person and by phone to identify points of entry for small-scale Asian vegetable and strawberry growers. The staff then analyzed the data to find promising opportunities for the growers to establish new buyer-grower relationships. The project combined research and outreach to Southeast Asian growers with the goal of helping refugee farming communities expand their marketing strategies.



Certified farmers market in Sacramento

Project Findings:

- Surveys found that fewer than half of Southeast Asian growers with certified producer certificates (20 out of 42 farmers interviewed) actually sell to farmers markets in Sacramento, indicating a shortage of openings. Those without certified producer certificates sell predominantly at farm stands (Mien strawberry growers) or to local Asian grocery stores (Hmong vegetable growers).
- The key challenges confronting Southeast Asian farmers in marketing their produce generally are language barriers; centralized purchasing of many wholesalers, chain grocery stores, and restaurants; sophisticated food safety documentation and labeling requirements by larger customers; the high cost of transportation and competition with organic produce.
- Many flea market managers and several local grocery stores, chefs, schools, and wholesalers expressed interest in buying from local farmers.

Project Impacts:

- The results from buyer interviews were provided to over 100 Southeast Asian growers at two workshops. At the annual strawberry growers' meeting in Sacramento, 75 strawberry farmers attended a talk titled, "Beyond the Farm Stand: Where can I sell my berries." Handouts listing specific marketing opportunities with contact information, along with a list of necessary permits and how to get them for each market, were distributed.

- Two growers began selling at Soil Born Farms' certified farmers market and WIC farm stand, two growers began selling to Galt Flea Market, and two growers were linked with Monterey Market in Berkeley through the Growers' Collaborative.

Project Recommendations:

- At the policy level, explore making 'off-farm' stands legal and work with various local institutions to integrate fresh, local food in their food service provision.
- At the extension level, create culturally appropriate and durable training modules (DVDs) in proper food safety, pesticide and food handling practices to enhance marketability.
- At the marketing level, identify and support initiatives, such as the Growers' Collaborative, or marketing interns from local universities, to facilitate linking farmers with new customers.
- At the farmer level, encourage diversification of crops and marketing venues to enhance sales and economic viability.



Crop diversity, such as these three varieties of Asian long beans, helps pulls in customers



Jennifer Sowerwine addressing Southeast Asian farmers at annual growers' meeting

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