

Program turns farmworkers into farmers, fosters small businesses

By JULIANA BARBASSA Associated Press Writer
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SALINAS, Calif.—Hunched over rows of parsley, Maria Luz Reyes swiftly gathers, slices and binds the fragrant bunches. It looks like just another backbreaking task in the fields, but for Reyes, it's a dream job.

"I always wanted to do this again," said Reyes, who used to help run her father-in-law's ranch in her native Mexico. "If you've run a farm, and you love it, you always want to go back."

Through the Agriculture and Land-Based Training Association, or ALBA, the former packing plant worker learned to run her own farm on leased land and overcome the hurdles facing small agricultural operations. Reyes recently purchased a 10-acre farm of her own, fulfilling a dream she'd nurtured since moving to California 17 years ago.

Experts say programs such as ALBA's that bring new faces to agriculture are becoming increasingly important at a time when farmers are aging and bigger farms are pushing out small operations.

The average age of farmers is now 56. About 90 percent of American farms are family-owned, but new generations can be hesitant to take over the business, according to a 2007 U.S. Department of Agriculture survey.

The number of large and corporate-owned farms also have been going up, along with their share of production. They're responsible for 75 percent of the value of agricultural production and tend to have more comfortable profit margins than small farms, according to the USDA survey.

ALBA's six-month intensive training program works like a small-farm incubator, giving would-be growers the technical expertise and marketing savvy, and even leasing them land for a few years until they can buy their own. Other programs working to bring new and minority farmers to the fields include Farms to Grow Inc., which supports ethnic small farmers, and California FarmLink, which connects retiring farm operators with aspiring farmers to keep the land in production.

When a program like ALBA trains aspiring farmers, it has to teach them to buck the challenges facing small operations, said Kristin Reynolds, program representative at the University of California's Small Farm Center.

The diversity of crops and the small portions produced make it difficult for small farmers to work with wholesalers interested in large batches of greens or fruit with a guaranteed delivery date, she said.

Farmers add that it's harder for a small producer to overcome a big unexpected loss. And they have to be jacks-of-all-trades such as Reyes, who can get down among rows of strawberries to weed, then drop the sickle to balance financial books.

Through ALBA, Reyes has prospered. She learned how to farm organically and sell at a handful of farmers' markets in the region—both niches where small farmers do particularly well. She also figured out how to borrow money to invest in land, something she'd never had to do in Mexico.

"It's very hard to compete with large companies that can guarantee a large amount of product at a certain time, but we're making it work," she said.

Farmers themselves are not the only ones to reap advantages from keeping small farms in operation. Small farms bring different values—and veggies—to the table, Reynolds said.

"They can be more diverse, have more wildlife, grow different varieties of food, and focus on things that can be direct-marketed, that don't have to be shipped, that will be fresher, and picked ripe instead of when they're green," Reynolds said.

Juan Perez, 23, who farms two of ALBA's 110 acres as a program graduate, runs a farm-to-consumer delivery system with his family. The direct marketing allows him to take advantage of the personal contact and produce variety he can offer his customers.

He also can experiment with crops that wouldn't likely be found on a larger outfit. Among the dozen or so products he grows are rows of organic epazote, an herb used in Mexican cuisine to spice beans that he felt would sell well among Monterey County's large Hispanic population.

Judging by customer response, the small farmers coming out of ALBA's program seem to have figured out how to make the business work.

Francisco Serrano, who used to farm on his own but has taken courses at ALBA, has forged a relationship with the Hayward Unified School District. On Mondays he sets up a stand outside Longwood Elementary to sell his produce to the rush of parents picking up their kids after school.

The school also has taken advantage of Serrano's presence to teach kids about healthy eating, incorporating discussions about nutrition and seasonal foods into the curriculum, said Elizabeth Beak, who runs the garden and the cooking classes.

Although school's out for the summer, Rupal Solomon and her fifth-grader returned Monday for the chance to buy from Serrano.

"He's always excited about Mondays," Solomon said of her son as they picked out a basket of strawberries. "And at the same time he's learning to eat well. What can be better than that?"

On the Net:

Agriculture and Land-Based Training Association: <http://www.albafarmers.org/>

University of California Small Farm Center: <http://www.sfc.ucdavis.edu/>

California FarmLink: <http://www.californiafarmlink.org/>

Farms to Grow Inc.: <http://www.farmstogrow.org/>

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