

Food for People - Modified CSA Modeling for New EBT Project

The **Minnesota Food Association** of Stillwater, Minnesota received \$52,793 to develop a pilot, replicable and manageable CSA that meets the needs of new farmers, low-income customers for affordable, and accessible local fresh produce; and to train new immigrant farmers to market directly to consumers. The project trained new farmers in CSA models and supported nearly 100 low-income families.

[Final Report FY09](#)

Farmers Market Promotion Program (FMPP) – 2009

Minnesota Food Association

Final Report for the period April 11, 2011 through Sept 30, 2011 and Summary
December 31, 2011

Project Title:

Original Title: Food For People – Modified CSA Modeling for New
EBT Project
Revised Title: Food For People – CSA Modeling and Training

Project Number:

12-25-0950
3. State
Minnesota

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Funding Awarded:

\$52,793

Funding used to date:

\$ 52,793 (received)

I. Summary:

Minnesota Food Association operates a new immigrant farmer training program called Big River Farms, together with a 160-member CSA and a small wholesale distribution service. MFA uses the markets as a means for practical market training for the farmers in the program. MFA's initial application included a CSA, which FMPP withdrew from the proposal, so the revised project focuses only on training farmers in CSA models and in bringing food to low income communities while raising their food awareness. For the 2010 season, there were 9 farms in the BRF program, representing about 25 farmers in training. For the 2011 season, there were 10 farms in the program representing 29 farmers. We have already recruited farmers for the 2012 season as well with 5 farms returning and 5 farms moving on to their own operations. We also held another stellar successful 6th Annual Immigrant and Minority Farmers Conference in February 2011 with over 250 total participants and over 160 farmers. We redesigned the winter training class schedule to include three 4-session modules from Jan – April, whereby the 1st-year farmers must attend all 12 sessions but 2nd-year onwards farmers only needed to attend the second two modules (8 sessions). We worked with the farmers so that they all had plot plans and markets. We also redesigned the season training sessions to include 4 tours of other farms in our area, numerous in-field skill sessions are aimed at being very specific production-orientated short workshops for the farmers in the program, and 3 comprehensive in-field workshops (two on Post-harvest handling and one on Seed saving). The markets for the 1st year farmers are not 'contracted' since it depends on their production and post-harvest capabilities. Yet, in the end for the 2011 season, all the farmers had at least 2 different markets. MFA operated Big River Farms CSA and sold to 8 additional markets, which about 75% of the produce came from the farms in the program and 25% from our own production. Four farms in the program operated their own

CSAs in 2011. Four farms sold directly to restaurants. Three farms sold to schools. Four farms sold to Coops. Four farms sold to whole sale distributors. Seven farms sold at farmers markets. BRF and the farms-in-training distributed about \$210,000 worth of certified organic, local produce from about 19 acres and 2 hoopouses, and \$9,000 worth of certified organic transplants from 2 mid-sized greenhouses.

MFA continued to work with Emergency Food Shelf Network and their Harvest for the Hungry program to distribute fresh produce to low income or disadvantaged families. For the 2011 season, we distributed \$6,000 worth of produce to local food shelves. No new movement was made on the Neighborhood Food Project of 2009-2010. The ‘CSA Network’ project has basically fizzled and not developed as planned because some ‘senior CSAs’ view it as another regulatory body rather than a support network. However, two more meetings of CSAs were held and the discussion on how to support the burgeoning CSAs continues.

II. Project Goals:

The initial **overall goal** of this project is to develop and pilot a replicable and manageable model that meets the needs of the CSAs, new farmers, the new customers/customers specifically in low income areas, that increases both markets and affordability and accessibility of local fresh produce to the larger publican contributes to building a more sustainable food system. This is modified now as we continue to explore how we can develop a CSA model that does work for low income families while still being worthwhile for the farmer. It may be possible that even adaptations of the traditional CSA model will not work, and that a new approach to direct marketing between farmers and consumers needs to be envisioned and developed.

The revised **objectives** in the revised proposal focused on:

- 1) Training 10 new immigrant farmers in the implementing a CSA, both in the traditional and modified way, to increase their marketing opportunities
- 2) Increasing food and health awareness in at least two low income communities through partnering with community-based organizations in specific neighborhoods and building on the current community-based study.

Objective #1: To train 10 new immigrant farmers in implementing a CSA ...

Results:

- In 2010, one established CSA farm has provided training to the 9 farms in the BRF program and to a group of over 60 immigrant farmers at the Annual Immigrant Farming Conference.
- In 2011, one CSA farm provided training to the 10 farms visited and the farmers made two field trip visits to two established CSA farms in our region.
- Four farms in the BRF program have established and operated their own CSA for the 2011 season
- All 10 farms in the training understand the basic model of operating a CSA, but we have not addressed the usage of an EBT system.
- Farmers have seen the benefits and difficulties with the CSA model and all have decided to scale down their CSAs (up to 30 members) while they get their production and record-keeping systems in place. We continue to see a number of new CSAs (under 3 years, who are

not in the MFA program) struggle, fold, barely survive and experience negative feedback and low retention rates. It remains a concern.

- In 2011, all the farms participate on at least one box-packing day for the BRF CSA to learn grading and the process. But time restraints on the farmers limit their ability to participate.

Objective #2: To increase food and health awareness in low income communities ...

Results:

- The one BRF CSA dropsite in North Minneapolis area has been transferred to a local urban CSA in the area. This helps to have the CSA and ‘farm’ more grounded in the neighborhood.
- CSA member retention rate was about 65% from 2010 - 2011 for the BRF CSA but we did not develop a system for low income families. The program farmers’ CSAs have about 30% retention rate so far. One CSA has decreased their dropsite locations to either farm pick-up or their house (in St Paul) in order to make distribution more practical.
- There is a remarkable renewed and increasing interest in fresh healthy food in the 2 neighborhoods being surveyed in St Paul. The findings do not show one particular approach as a means to really begin addressing food access. No progress has been made in this area. Some groups are looking to develop an urban agriculture gardening and outreach center in each of the neighborhoods.
- The Emergency Food Shelf Network Harvest for the Hungry program continues to grow and excel. In 2011, MFA collected \$3,100 in donations and EFN then purchased over \$6,000 in produce from the farmers in our program and distributed this to various food shelves. The farmers get paid and have a new market and the food shelves get fresh, locally grown produce.
- We have a tentative conclusion that the traditional CSA model, even with tweaks as payment in 4 – 5 installments, is still not quite working for low income families. Unless the family can use EBT to pay for their CSA on a weekly basis, then it may not work. And if the farmer does not receive payment before the season, then is it really a “CSA” or is some other model? These dilemmas remain.

III. Current Program Status and Activities:

From the previous report: For the 2010 season, there were 9 farms in the BRF program, representing about 25 farmers in training. They represent communities of Hmong, Mexico, Kenya, Cambodia, and Burma (Karen). They all completed 10 classroom workshops and 10 In-Field workshops through September 2010. The production results varied with farms grossing between \$3,000 to over \$50,000 depending on their skill and markets and level of experience. Five first-year farmers did not sell to BRF (except on 3 occasions for a specific crop), but many of them have established their own other direct markets. MFA helped one new Hmong farm family register at a new local farmers market. All the other farms have 4 or more diverse markets set up – wholesale distributors, farmers markets, CSAs, restaurants, coops, schools and more. MFA has been successful in brokering market relationships by handing over markets to our experienced farmers. The Cala Farms is a good example where they have now taken over the Chipotle, Marine General Store and Scandia Café accounts. However, in 2010 Chipotle lowered their price again for the Calas and then again in 2011 they have lowered it even more. It appears that they do not have the bargaining clout with Chipotle. If Chipotle does not increase their price for 2012, they will abandon this corporate account. Three farms in the program are running their

own CSAs directly as well (in their 2nd or 3rd year, with 15 – 30 members). One farm has started its own greenhouse at the Big River Farms and is producing transplants for sale as well. This is the only immigrant producer-own certified organic source of transplants in MN. Three other farms have set up their own small hoophouse for propagation and production at their homes. MFA provided about 6,000 pounds of fresh produce to local food shelves through Emergency Food Shelf Network and their Harvest for the Hungry Program.

Update: In 2011, MFA worked comprehensively and directly with 10 “farms”, representing 29 farmers. The participants included Guatemalan, Hmong, Cambodian, Karen, Kenyan, Bhutanese and Somali farmers. All the farmers in our program are considered “low income” by IRS standards and are “socially disadvantaged” by USDA standards. The farmers all come from the 7 county Twin Cities Metro Area and the St Croix River Valley of MN and Wisconsin. All but one of these farmers have a primary full time job as teachers, translators, factory workers, maids, nurses, and other jobs. MFA also worked with an additional 50 “food farmers” in the program who are primarily Hmong elders who produce mostly for themselves and community. An additional 20 or so farmers attended our classroom and field training classes that are open to the public. We had between 2 – 10 farmers from outside the program at each session. We reached another 170 immigrant farmers through the Annual Minority and Immigrant Farmers Conference in February 2011 and expect another 180-200 in February 2012. MFA’s reach is moving beyond MN and WI now. New immigrant farmer training programs from WI, NE, IA and ME visited our program in the 2011 season. We will soon be developing a standardized curriculum based on our 5 -6 years experience on our current training site that can then be reproduced and replicated in other parts of the county. Overall, MFA reaches about 300 immigrant farmers annually with training, technical support and outreach.

One farm applied for and received a FSA loan and bought their own farm. One farm applied for and received an import permit for “water spinach” seeds (a leafy green from Southeast Asia) to be grown in MN – this is the first permit of this kind issued by AHPIS in MN. One farm signed up for NAP insurance but the other farmers declined.

There is an improved status and perception of immigrants, and their professional and productive role as citizens in society. Many people tell us how impressed they are with the farm production of some of the trainees in our program. The farmers in the program are the only certified organic immigrant farmers in MN. More immigrant communities are entering MFA’s training program. The diversity of trainees in the program continues to increase. We had new farmers from Karen (Burma), Bhutan and Somalia this season. However, the newer refugees find it very difficult to get into farming in the US too quickly. They face significant language, transportation and capital (basic operating funds) barriers. They just do not have the ‘community capacity’ (people who have some time, some English ability, a drivers license and a car, and some disposable income). Those individuals with some capacity to operate in America are in full demand all the time. It appears that the Bhutanese farmers will not be able to continue in 2012 because they can not find a translator, transportation to and from the farm, and the basic funds for seeds, equipment and tools.

Training Sessions and Farmers Forums for October 2010 – September 2011

When	Topic	Facilitator	Comments
Oct 25, 2010	End of the Year All Farmers Meeting	MFA staff and Farmers in Training	20 people
Jan 10, 2011	Business Planning	John Middleton	10 people
Jan 18, 2011	Business Planning cont.	John Middleton	11 people
Jan 24, 2011	Finances of Business Planning	Laura Frerichs	11 people
Feb 7, 2011	Organic Farming Principles	MFA staff	20 people
Feb 14, 2011	Crop Profiles	MFA staff	18 people
Feb 22, 2011	Plot planning, crop mapping	MFA staff	20 people
Feb 24-26, 2011	MOSES Organic Conference		4 MFA staff and 5 farmers
Feb 28	Marketing	MFA staff and Mills City Market Manager	21 people
March 7, 2011	Seed starting and Greenhouse production	Melanie Timpano and May Lee	15 people
March 14, 2011	Succession Planting	Laura Frerichs	25 people
March 21, 2011	Marketing	Linda Halley, Amy Douen	22 people
Mar 28, 2011	Record keeping – financial, organic certification	MFA staff	19 people
April 4, 2011	Farming Tax preparation	Alan Gregerson (IRS)	20 people
April 23, 2011	Orientation to Big River Farms	MFA staff	25 people
May 7, 2011	Farmers forum meeting	MFA staff	15 people
May 8, 2011	Farm visit to Foxtail farms CSA – weed management, cover cropping	Paul Burkhouse	22 people
May 14, 2011	Spring Open House	15 farmers	15 farmers
May 22, 2011	Farm visit to Blue Gentian Farm – small livestock and vegetables	Darryle Powers and MFA staff	21 people
June 4, 2011	Farm visit to Natura Farms – soil fertility and berry production	Paul Otten	21 people
June 16, 2011	Field skill session – Irrigation and mulching	MFA staff	15 people
June 19, 2011	Field workshop - Post-harvest Handling	Linda Halley	24 people
June 30, 2011	Field skill session - Trellising	MFA staff	15 people
July 11, 2011	Field skill session - Pests	MFA staff	17 people
July 30, 2011	Farmers forum meeting	MFA staff	14 people
Aug 29, 2011	Field skill session - pests	MFA staff	15 people
Sept 12, 2011	Field Workshop – Post-harvest handling	Linda Halley	18 people

Sept 17, 2011	Field Workshop – Seed Saving	Kathleen Plunckett-Black	19 people
Sept 19, 2011	Farm visit to Prairie Farm CSA	Kate Stout	12 people
Oct 9, 2011	Big River Slow Food and Tour of the farms	MFA Staff and 4 farmers	4 farmers
Oct 15, 2011	Fall Harvest Party, tour of the farms	4 farmers	4 farmers
Oct 23, 2011	End-of-the-Year Farmers Meeting	MFA staff	

Throughout the season, MFA staff works individually with the farmers on numerous production and marketing issues. The majority of the Training Coordinator’s, and now the Farm Manager and Assistant Director, time is spent in working with farmers on their plot plans, business plans, marketing approaches, organic certification applications, food safety planning, applications to USDA SARE Farmer grants, pest intervention and control, quality control and produce grading, packaging, and so on. While the number of farmers is relatively small, the relationship is close, intensive and supportive. All of the farms worked in the greenhouse at least once in April and many worked 4 -5 days on Saturday or Tuesday to learn propagation and greenhouse management. Each farm also participated in BRF CSA produce receiving and CSA box packing at least once during the 2011 season. This not only provides income but is also an excellent practical training mechanism for the farmers in production and distribution for different markets.

Beneficiaries and Benefits:

The program primarily serves communities of immigrants, particularly Latino, Hmong, Laotian, Cambodian, Burmese, Karen, Kenyan, and Bhutanese and others from East Africa and Southeast Asia, and other historically underserved communities as African-American and Native American farmers. About half the farmers are women. All the farmers in our program are considered “low income” by IRS standards and are “socially disadvantaged” by USDA standards. The farmers all come from the 7 county Twin Cities Metro Area and the St Croix River Valley of MN and Wisconsin. All the farmers but one have other primarily jobs, all low-paying, as maids, janitors, factory workers, etc. They farmed on plots ranging from ¼ acre to 7 acres. The program reached about 600 farmers over the 2 year period. However, the main beneficiaries of this project were the 9 farms (25 people) in 2010 and the 10 farms (29 people) in 2011. All the farms had good production. All the farms were able to sell produce and in 2011, all the farms had at least 2 significant market venues. Each farm was able to produce and sell gross revenue yields of \$8,000 - \$12,000 per acre, so even farms of ¼ acre were selling up to \$2,000 worth of produce. We are not sure of their actual ‘profit’ because it is still very difficult to get farmers to keep accurate records of expenses and calculate costs of production. We know our best, most experienced farm grossed over \$50,000 in sales for the 2011 season.

Annual Immigrant and Minority Farming Conference:

MFA, USDA FSA, and the Association of Hmong Women in MN (together with a significant group of volunteers) conducted the 6th Annual Immigrant and Minority Farming Conference in February 2011 with 170 immigrant farmers and about 240 total participants. We had inquiries from 18 states and eventually had participates from 6 states. The farmers come from the communities of Hmong, Laotian, Cambodia, Karen (Burma), Bhutanese, Somali, Oromo, Latino,

Kenya, Liberia, Ghana and African-American. This included 12 breakout workshops over 2 days. The conference remains free to farmer participants. Only sustainable and organic agriculture is promoted. A full report is attached. Each year the conference becomes more relevant and practical for the immigrant farmers as all the workshops must be presented by farmers and/or practitioners and all workshops have simultaneous interpretation. Sessions cover topics as organic certification, farmers markets, restaurant markets, pest and disease control, irrigation, and more. The 7th Annual Immigrant Farming Conference will be held from Feb 3-4, 2012 in St Paul. This is the largest gathering of immigrant farmers in the Midwest and one of the largest in the nation currently. This conference continues to be very effective in connecting farmers to the variety of resources available to them. It is a major venue in MN for USDA Agencies to reach minority and immigrant farmers (NASS, RMA, FSA, NRCS and RD all had booths; also MN Dept of Ag, MN Grown, MN Farmers Union, and many nonprofits). The conference is also an excellent venue for identifying and recruiting farmers into the MFA Big River Farms Program.

Public Awareness and Education:

MFA conducts a variety of activities to engage the community and raise public awareness. MFA conducted two major farm events each year – the Spring Open House in May and the Fall Harvest Party in October. We had 150 people at the Spring Open House and 220 people at the Fall Harvest Party. These events include farm tours, program and issue discussions, visits with farmers in the program and sharing information and fresh local food. MFA hosted 4 school children and youth groups to the farm each year. MFA also hosted Lutheran Services from Iowa, the International Program of the Humphrey Institute of the UMN, local nonprofit groups (FLAG, Assoc. for Hmong Women, Hmong American Partnership, American Oromo Association in MN, LSP, Washington County Master Gardeners), USDA and MN Dept of Agriculture officials, Marbrook Foundation and the Sustainable Agriculture Funders Coalition, and a few others. A Deputy Director of the USDA RMA, Mike Alztak visited in June 2011. MFA also held monthly Community Work Days from April through November that are open to the public where people can come to the farm and ‘work’ for a day, or half day, and learn about organic farming. Between 5 – 30 people participated in any given month. This has been hugely popular for families who want to expose their children to a first-hand experience on an organic farm. MFA staff makes regular presentations about food and farming to church and community groups as well. The Executive Director gives regular presentations about local food and farming issues to various public groups (Rotary Clubs, churches, school classes, businesses, etc.). MFA and MFA farmers have also been featured on local radio station shows and local cable TV shows. MFA again partnered with Slow Foods MN for the 2nd year in a row to host a Slow Food Dinner in Oct 2011 with four exceptional regional chefs preparing local food for about 80 people. This was a fundraiser. MFA also conducted one “Thank you Tours” of the farm for a select group of 12 - 15 individual donors from June – October.

IV. Additional Information:

Changes:

The most significant change in this project implementation has been to shift the marketing responsibilities to the Farm Manager with support from the Assistant Director. Because of close

proximity to the farmers-in-training, and our limited staffing, the Farm Manager coordinated and managed the CSA and the wholesale markets. We had markets with 2 coops, a food shelf, 2 restaurants, 2 distributors and the St Paul School District. We also had a number of markets interested in purchasing from our farmers so we handed these over directly. MFA sold about \$17,000 in wholesale sales in 2011 of which about \$13,000 was purchased directly from the farmers in our program. Above that we will work to connect these markets directly with the farmers in the training program. The Assistant Director handles the Data Bank entry and monitoring for all the marketing accounts and farmer accounts.

The diversity of the farmers continues to increase. We have farmers of 7 different ethnicities and a number of them are relatively new, under 5 years in the USA. The 2011 season was the first year of our new apprenticeship program with World Relief-MN and Karen Organization of MN where we had 4 Karen folks working on the Big River Farms fields for the season. They worked work 3 days / week, 8 hours/day and were paid \$7.25 through the grant (RAPP, ORR, HHS). In 2012, they will work on 10 – 16 hours/week on the farm and have their own plot(s). Then in 2013, they will not work on the farm and have larger plots with complete marketing plans. The diversity of farmers also challenges us with cultural and language issues. We require each farmer to bring their own translator as they need one and so far this has worked well.

Another change has been opening up our training classes to the general public. This has worked well because we clearly advertise the classes as targeting immigrant and minority farmers. We have had between 2 – 10 outside folks come to any given training class. Another change has been the addition of 4 farm tours this past season, where MFA arranged for the BRF farmers to visit local farms in our area (these tours are not open to the public but specific to our participants). And we have scaled down our ‘in-field’ training sessions because farmers expressed concern that they do not have the time for long sessions during the season. In 2011 the ‘skill sessions’ in the field were 30 - 60 minutes only and addressed one particular production skill (driptape, trellising, pest control, mulching, planting cover crop, etc.) – short and to the point and the farmers can get back to their fields. This season we were also diligent in scheduling a weekly field walk with each of the farms where the Farm Manager and/or Training Coordinator walked their fields with them for 30 – 60 minutes. This was to specifically provide advice and analysis for their plots – pests, yield estimates, succession plantings, etc.

Neighborhood Food Project:

The Neighborhood Food Project was a collaboration between The Minnesota Project, the Community Design Center of MN, and AfroEco (all of St Paul, MN), with support from the Ramsey County Public Health Department, Wilder Foundation Research Division and Metro State University to assess the food security status and needs of two neighborhoods in St Paul. This one-year planning project from November 2009 – October 2010 included 500 face-to-face verbal interviews and 12 focus group discussions with people in these neighborhoods. The interviews and focus groups are conducted in English, Spanish, Hmong, Karen, and Somali. The draft report was presented back to the communities in two Community Dinners on Oct 13 and 21. The final report came out at end November 2010. The results show that price is the main barrier to people of limited income accessing fresh healthy food. Other barriers include: not enough stores selling specific ethnic produce they seek so location and travel convenience; not

knowing about what food resources and opportunities are available; not know what to do with fresh produce or what is ‘healthy food’. So far the Team has not yet come up with any plans as to how to move this forward. We seem to have reached an initial deadlock. The farmers want a good price and the consumer wants inexpensive fresh local produce. It appears that there is a need for the use of EBT in paying for the weekly CSA box in combination with a revolving fund set up for the farmers so they can get their money up front to buy supplies.

CSA Network Project:

The CS Network Project was developed by Chris Blanchard of Rock Spring Farms, Linda Halley of Gardens of Eagan, and Rhys Williams of The Wedge Coop, with cooperation from MFA, to address issues facing the growing number of CSAs in MN and Western Wisconsin. The findings show that a formal CSA network was received with some great support from young farmers and very strong resistance from experienced older CSAs. The resistance is primarily against the idea of a central coordinating body for CSAs, with the assumption being that this would lead to some ‘standards’ and regulations. It was clear that different CSA farmers have different perspectives on the approach and values of a CSA. Some view it as a marketing and financing tool, while others view it as a purer way of farming that is not related to markets. The farmers in our program view it as another marketing channel. However, this project has continued with two informal gatherings of CSA farmers so that the farmers can better get to know each and share ideas in an informal setting and build trust. This project has also led to two of our farmers developing direct contacts with experienced CSAs in a mentoring relationship.

MFA Organization Capacity:

MFA operates with 4 permanent staff at 3.5 FTE and one seasonal worker, and 2 regular volunteers working about 4 hours/week on the farm, and 4 barter shares who exchange 50 hours of work for a BRF CSA share. MFA is seeking to hire 1 – 2 additional employees when funds become available, with the priority being a part-time Marketing Coordinator to assist farmers in making direct connections with new markets as restaurants, residential senior centers, schools, corner stores, coops and distributors. MFA maintains a fully operational farm with tractors and accessories, 50 tillable acres fenced, irrigation, washing facility, two walk-in coolers, a delivery van and office.

V. Problems and Delays:

There are no ‘problems’, but the process of connecting with experienced CSAs and in supporting our new CSA farmers in our training program has been slower than expected. One issue is that the old school of traditional CSAs feels that CSAs must be operated in a certain way with intensive customer interaction, and new CSAs are looking more at CSA as one of many types of diversifying their markets. So while customer interaction is important, they are still willing to sell CSA shares to institutions (offices) and have only one or no ‘farm events’, where traditional CSAs will have 2 or more farm events for their members. It is a changing face of CSAs.

Another issue with the exponential growth of CSAs in the western Wisconsin and Minnesota region is the quality of the CSAs and the reputation of the CSA movement. Since 2006, the

number of CSAs has more than doubled from about 40 to now well over 80 CSA farms. Most all the new CSA farms have less than 3 years experience in farming and end up having to buy in produce from other farms to fill their boxes. Another phenomenon is large conventional vegetable farms who have traditionally only supplied large distributors are now beginning CSA operations and usually starting out on a very large scale, over 200 members. This creates strong competition for new, beginning farmers trying to develop their small farm enterprise.

Another issue in connecting farmers to farmers has been that during the season is the best time to visit other farms, but farmers do not have time during these times. So we have designed our farm visits to be relatively shorter (1/2 day, or about 2 – 3 hours on the farm, compared to a full day or 6 hours on the farm) and we are going to pay a gratitude fee to the farms that we visit.

The results and findings of the community food assessment were not as definitive as we had expected. Besides price / cost as a major factor, we see that it will take a multi-pronged approach to addressing food security and access in low income urban neighborhoods. There are a number of urban agriculture initiatives and groups trying to develop cooperative projects but this will take time to develop. MFA will partner with this but not lead this.

VI. Lessons Learned and Future Plans:

We will continue to increase our connections with experienced CSAs and increase our training components related to CSA farming and marketing because the farmers in our training program are interested in this. However, we are clear that CSA farming and marketing is not for every farmer. It requires sophisticated production skills and advanced record keeping and people skills. We found that modifications of the traditional CSA model help newer farms by providing an additional market and by allowing them to get some money in the pre-season to purchase supplies and seeds. These modifications include:

- Start and stay small. 10 – 30 members are plenty.
- Reduce the number of dropsites to only one or two dropsites.
- Reduce the number of weeks. Traditional CSAs in MN normally do 18 weeks but there is no need to. Reduce to a 10 week season, or divide the season up in an early leafy green / brassica section of 3 – 4 weeks in the Spring and then a 6 – 8 week section in mid-to-late summer of traditional crops (peppers, tomatoes, beans, zucchini, etc.).

We will further assess whether a traditional CSA model can be an appropriate means of bringing affordable and accessible fresh produce to low income communities but it appears that it needs more exploration. From our experience, these communities tend to not have the income to pay the farmer the price they need. Possibly a combination of using EBT payments to pay on a weekly basis would work but by itself it (just paying on a weekly basis) is not really a “CSA” where the consumer is sharing the risk with the farmer by paying ahead of the season. This may be combined with a “revolving fund” where by the farmer has a fund that they tap in the beginning of the season for expenses, arranges commitments from the number of customers that the farmer wants, and then uses the weekly payments to re-supply the revolving fund.

The initial proposed project was to include an EBT component, which was subsequently deleted from the project by FMPP in the review process. Upon reflection, this was probably best. We

still have more background information to gather, we need to build up our capacity, and we need to determine if using an EBT system is a good approach in our situation. We may also look at other direct marketing models like ‘agreed purchase’ – to put down a deposit (\$20 or \$30) in the pre-season and then agree to purchase that amount and more as the season progresses.

Our main plan is to continue to work with farmers in developing their own ‘market portfolio’ that fits the types of farming and marketing that they prefer and excel at. MFA remains in an excellent position to be ‘brokering market relations’, whereby MFA can initiate the market relationship with new buyers and then work with the farmers and the buyers to hand the market completely over the farmer. MFA has done this on many occasions in the past 3 years. MFA will focus on securing resources to hire a Marketing Coordinator to lead this forward. In addition to this, MFA will focus on training in grading produce and proper post-harvest handling and food safety which we have identified as the weak links in the production-for-market chain for new and immigrant growers of organic specialty crops.

Conclusion:

The total two-year grant award was for \$52,793 and MFA has received the full reimbursement amount.

The project proceeded well. We were very pleased with the progress of the farmers in our training program especially in the areas of marketing, understanding different markets, post-harvest handling and food safety and organic production. Our farmers understand different markets extremely well; much better than the average immigrant grower some of whom have been doing this for 10 – 20 years. As the farmers markets are mostly full with vendors, and many have 2 – 5 year waiting lists, it is vital that farmers find other ways of selling their produce and connecting with buyers. MFA excels in filling that niche. We warmly welcome a visit from any FMPP staff to our farm and program, preferably during the growing season but anytime is fine.

Attached:

1. Report on the 6th Annual Immigrant and Minority Farmers Conference
2. Harvest Journal Article, August 2011
3. Star Tribune Article, October 2011
4. Media and Video Links about MFA and Big River Farms
5. FMPP Grant Budget Monitoring Sheet
6. Final SF 425 Form
7. Final Request Letter for Reimbursement

December 31, 2011

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Final Report
6th Annual Immigrant and Minority Farmers
Conference
Saint Paul, Minnesota
February 4-5, 2011

The goal of the conference was to help immigrant and minority farmers plant seeds for success on their farms.

This conference, the sixth annual event, was once again a collaborative effort of many people and organizations. We express our sincere gratitude to everyone who was involved and participated. The four lead agencies in planning and organizing were: Minnesota Food Association, USDA- Farm Service Agency, Association for the Advancement of Hmong Women in Minnesota, and USDA- Natural Resource Conservation Service.

The Planning Committee also included: MN Dept of Ag; Farmers' Legal Action Group, U of Minnesota Extension; U of Minnesota College of Food, Agriculture and Natural Resource Sciences; U of Minnesota Agricultural Safety and Health Program; and farmers from Mhonpaj's Garden and Intrinsik Farm. Individuals representing these agencies participated and contributed their hard work and hearts to make this a successful growing conference. This conference could not have been done without this group of dedicated committee members.

Attendance: 305 people registered, 34 people paid to attend. We actually had 253 different people attending. There were 17 interpreters, 15 farmer presenters, 19 agency presenters, 9 volunteers. 97 different agency people attended over the 2 days, with 81 attending on Friday and 57 attending on Saturday.

156 farmers attended the conference, with 124 farmers attending on Friday and 118 on Saturday. We attempted to gather demographic data at the registration table. This presented some challenges to us due to language and the morning conference registration logistics. We successfully gathered data on 88% of the farmers. We had attendance from farmers in Ohio, Maine, Michigan, Nebraska, Iowa, Kansas, Wisconsin, and Minnesota. In some cases only partial data was gathered.

Here is a demographic summary of the reporting farmers:

<p>Land 34% of farmers are leasing land 30% of farmers are not farming yet 4% of farmers own their land</p>	<p>Gender 42% women 23% men</p>
<p>Age of Farmers 10% between 60 and 70 years old 52% in their 50's 23% in their 40's 11% in their 30's 6% in their 20's</p>	<p>Ethnicity 34% Hmong 15% Karen 19% Bhutanese 3% African 3% Caucasian 2% Latino</p>

Interpretation: The conference was interpreted using simultaneous interpretation equipment and headsets into Karen, Bhutanese, Somali, Swahili and Hmong languages. About 85 individuals required interpretation services. There were Spanish-speaking participants as well; however, they did not require headset interpretation.

Opening Session: Representatives of the following agencies gave opening remarks related to the significance of immigrants farming for food and the work of their agencies related to immigrant farmers growing food for human consumption:

- Association for the Advancement of Hmong Women of MN
- USDA- Farm Service Agency
- USDA -Risk Management Agency
- USDA- Natural Resource Conservation Service
- Minnesota Department of Agriculture
- AgStar Minnesota
- Farmers' Legal Action Group
- Land Stewardship Project
- Minnesota Food Association

Keynote Presentations: Dr. Yang Dao gave the keynote presentation on Saturday morning describing the history of Hmong farming in Laos, France, French Guiana and California. His photos from 5 decades were truly inspiring to the farmers and all of the participants.

Workshops and Discussions: Twelve workshops were held over the two days covering the following topics: *Whole Farm Planning; Pesky Plant Problems; Season Extension; Finding Grants and Loans; Renting; Leasing or Owning Land; Organic Certification; Plan Your Plot; Understanding Farmers Market Rules; Poultry Production and Marketing; Farmer/Buyer Networking; and Seed Saving.*

The presenters for each workshop included both farmers and representatives from various agencies including the University of MN Extension and USDA. The presenters included: Aaron Blyth, Minnesota Food Association; Rodrigo Cala, Cala Farm Origins; Kevin Cavanaugh, AAHWMN; Wayne Martin, U of MN Extension; Suzanne Peterson, farmer; Michele Schermann, U of MN; Susan Stokes, FLAG; May Lee and Mhonpaj Lee from Mhonpaj's Garden; Cree Bradly from Chelsea Farms; Richard Ness, Land Stewardship Project; Dia Xiong, Farmer; Bob Cramer, Cramer Organics; Brett Olson, Renewing the Countryside; Valerie Gamble, MN Department of Ag; Hai Trong, Ngon Restaurant; Katie Kubovcik, Minnesota Food Association; Hli Xyooj, FLAG; David Nicolson, FLAG; Madeline Kastler, IATP; Mai Xiong Yang, farmer; Kathleen Plunkett-Black, Seed Savers; and Patrick O'Rourke, US Customs.

Promotion: The conference was advertised widely beforehand through listserves, direct invitations, community events, personal communications, press releases to the media and calendar postings. Most of the farmers found out about the conference through one-to-one communication. Many save the date postcards were handed out to vendors at farmer markets during the previous growing season. The Association for the Advancement of Hmong Women remains key to the recruitment of farmers to this conference. This year the tragic untimely death of General Vang Pao, whose funeral was in Fresno, California and conflicted with the conference dates, caused many of the Hmong farmers who registered not to be able to attend. This could not be avoided. Transportation for many farmers to and from the conference was provided by a school bus and organized by the Association for the Advancement of Hmong Women of Minnesota.

Budget: The conference expenses were about \$22,500, which is an increase of about 25% over the previous year. This is due primarily to increased number of participants, more presenters and better compensation for interpreters. The revenue for the conference came from conference fees, private grants, USDA and MN Dept of Agriculture sponsorships, and private sponsorships. We fortunately raised slightly more than the expenses and this will be carried forward to 7th Annual Conference in 2012. The savings were a result of the venue being significantly less than expected and a major donation for the food from Joe Hatch- Surisook owner of the Sen Yai Sen Lek Thai restaurant.

Sponsors: Our Legacy sponsors included: USDA - Farm Service Agency; Hmong Women's Association of Minnesota; USDA - Natural Resource Agriculture Service and Minnesota Food Association.

Our Visionary Sponsors included; AgStar Financial Services; Farmer's Legal Action Group; Land Stewardship Project; Mississippi Market; Minnesota Department of Agriculture; U of M Extension; USDA - Office of Advocacy and Outreach; and USDA Risk Management Agency.

Our Champion Sponsors included: Renewing the Countryside; USDA -National Agriculture Statistics Service; USDA Rural Development.

Our Leader Sponsors included: Bremer Bank; Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy; Lao Family Community of Minnesota: Statewide Tobacco Education and Engagement Project; Minnesota Farmer's Union; Minnesota Institute for Sustainable Agriculture; Midwest Organic and Sustainable Education Services; Peace Coffee; Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education.

The sponsor benefits included: being listed in the promotional brochure and the conference program, placement of their logo in the program, acknowledgement in press releases, an opportunity for tabling, presenting opening remarks to the plenary, and Signage in the lobby area for the conference.

Grant sponsorship came from: Beverly Foundation, Carolyn Foundation, Minnesota Department of Agriculture Specialty Crop Block Program, USDA-RMA and USDA-RME

Through the generosity of our sponsors we were able to cover our conference expenses. Because of our sponsors, the conference is made available for free to farmers. Non-farmers paid a small conference fee.

We had donations of seed catalogs and seed packets from Baker Creek Seeds, High Mowing Organic Seeds, and Seeds of Change. We also had donations of items for gifts to the farmers from Jordan's Seeds, Frattalone's Ace Hardware and Abbott Paint. Coffee was donated by Peace Coffee and the lunches were donated by Sen Yai Sen Lek Restaurant.

Evaluation: The purpose of the evaluation is to determine what information was learned and if there are any anticipated changes in practices due to participation in a specific workshop. The evaluation process always faces challenges with language, understanding the value of evaluating, and general logistical issues in obtaining meaningful data. However, this year we solicited oral input from the attendees and we had the interpreters assist in gathering the data. This seemed to work better than other methods we have used in previous years. There was greater participation and more accurate results.

At the conclusion of each workshop a moderator asked for ideas that participants found useful. Once there was a list of ideas, then the moderator asked how many participants might use this idea in their farm.

Some of the interesting results included:

1. *Whole Farm Planning*: 79% of the participants found that it was useful to know that their happiness in farming is tied to having their own vision and thinking for themselves.
2. *Pesky Plant Problems*: 49% of the participants thought that using organic farming would be good for them and 44% thought they might apply organic farming methods to their farm.
3. *Beat the Heat with the Coolbot*: 14% of the participants thought they would build a Coolbot and apply for USDA FSA loan to help them with it.
4. *Season Extension*: 74% learned that they could grow in the winter in Minnesota.
5. *Finding Money*: 22% were interested in FSA and this was the first time they heard about FSA. 15% said they wanted to get loans for high tunnels and 4% wanted to get youth loans for livestock.
6. *Renting Land*: 36% thought that having toilets available was a good idea and 32% thought that flexibility in the lease was useful to them.
7. *Got Local? Farmer Buyer Networking*: 58% of the participants were inspired by the farmer's story and 53% found it useful to learn from the restaurant owners.
8. *Organic Certification*: 83% of those attending thought that organic was healthy and 21% thought they would like to use the organic certification process.
9. *Plan Your Plot*: Responses were not counted, although people mentioned that learning about different plant families, crop rotation, succession planting, spacing your plants and planting more than you need was helpful.
10. *Understanding Farmers Market Rules*: 58% said they would speak up if they were treated unfairly by market managers.
11. *Poultry Production*: 100% of the attendees thought they might go into livestock of poultry production.
12. *Save Those Seeds*: 67% of those attending thought the specific plant information was useful, especially about processing and storing seeds.

Lessons Learned and Future Ideas:

Farmer Engagement: The farmers on the planning committee took a major and visible role at the conference by answering questions, solving technical problems and taking clear ownership of the event. Farmers were more engaged this year than in past years. They took great initiative to ask questions of the speakers. There was great farmer energy and ownership of the conference.

Space: The conference space was ideal. Rooms were spacious and accessible

Interpretation: We conducted a workshop before the conference for interpreters and conference presenters. The workshop was designed to give interpreters and presenters an opportunity to think about how best to work together to make the interpretation experience most useful to the attendees. Those who attended found it very useful.



Exhibit Passport: This year we had a designated time for the interpreters to take farmers through the exhibits. The farmers had a passport in their packet to get signed at each exhibit. With this signed passport, they received some Hmong heirloom seeds.

Food: The food quality was outstanding and received rave reviews.



Farmer Incentives: We continued to give farmer incentives and gave away items in a drawing at the end of each day. Packing boxes, harvest totes, hoes, rubber bands, plastic bags, seed envelopes were very popular. Farmers also received personalized conference participation certificates. The final award and gift ceremony is one of the farmer's favorite activities of the

conference.

Outreach: Our outreach efforts suffered this year because of the untimely death of General Vang Pao, whereby many Hmong farmers went to California for the funeral.

Workshops: Some sessions are for beginning farmers and some are for more experienced farmers. We currently have 2 tracks: a business track and a production track. Within those tracks we could have 'beginning' and 'experienced' workshops.

Conclusion: The 6th Immigrant and Minority Farmers Conference was a great success. It is a truly inspirational space of networking, discussions and learning for the so many different nationalities, languages, and cultures gathered with the common goal of strengthening local, healthy food systems and growing more farmers. This is the largest gathering of immigrant farmers in the United States and continues to contribute to growing a culture of small family farms feeding our communities.

Immigrant farmers plant seeds for a new life

Article by: , Star Tribune

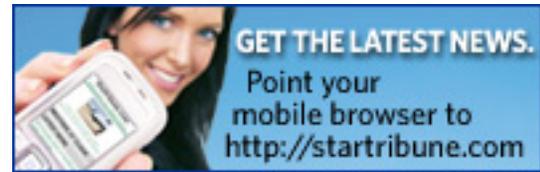
Updated: October 8, 2011 - 7:54 PM

As a rising sun lifts the chill from his rows of vegetables, Mohamed Gaabane pulls radishes, a singular lank figure in pursuit of the American dream.

This is Big River Farms, a 60-acre farm "incubator" near Marine on St. Croix, where immigrant and minority farmers learn how to produce crops that will find a ready market in Minnesota. It's here, where the field is a classroom, that they learn to grow organic food with dreams of something bigger.

Having been a farmer in Somalia, Gaabane looks forward to the day when he can return to farming in Minnesota. He wants a place where he can raise chickens and goats and grow kale, tomatoes, squash and other vegetables for his native community in the Twin Cities.

Across the field, Amy Doeun packs vegetables into boxes for delivery to customers. She and her husband, Proeun, a native of Cambodia, enrolled at Big River Farms three years ago. Their dream is much the same as Gaabane's -- to learn enough about agriculture to become independent farmers.



The Doeuns, a cross-cultural St. Paul family, have four children. Proeun drives a metro bus when he's not at Big River. Amy said they've been told by friends that they're "throwbacks" to an earlier time when farmers toiled away without help from machines to fill tables in nearby homes.

"I think it's a real big sense of accomplishment that we grew all this food that we're feeding all these families, feeding our family," Amy said. "It's a lot of hard work, but it's rewarding work."

Big River Farms, a program of the Minnesota Food Association (MFA), began operations in 2005 at its current location in the Wilder Forest in northern Washington County. Its mission: To train those enrolled in every aspect of farming, including the hard work of selling that comes after crop production.

Farming at Big River is done by hand. Plots vary in size, from a couple of rows to an acre or so, but they're never called "gardens." They are small-scale "farms" where enrollees learn the same practices that apply at bigger farms. They're even encouraged to name their farms, said Glen Hill, the MFA's executive director.

"They should have an identity. They should have a name to their farm. They should have a brand," Hill said.

The Doeuns did just that. They gave their operation a name: Crazy Boy Farm. And they started a website to promote their production and sale of organic

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vegetables.

Under that name, the family now sells boxes of vegetables to 29 customers in the Twin Cities. Amy's packing of vegetables at the farm last week was the 15th of the season. Brussels sprouts, winter squash, carrots, soybeans and broccoli all went into the boxes -- moving the country to the city.

They, like other farmers at Big River, sell their vegetables through the Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) program. Customers pay \$500 for their weekly deliveries of vegetables. Hill said CSA is one of several markets available to Big River farmers.

Immigrant farmers are taught to look beyond obvious markets for their food -- and to plant "high-value" crops that will bring higher prices -- to avoid going broke, Hill said.

"People want to grow food for their [native] communities, which is very noble and the right thing to do," he said. "When you get to the commercial standpoint, what is the market and what will it do? You're never going to be commercially viable selling only at farmers' markets."

Farmers must earn \$500 to \$800 a day at farmers' markets to make money, Hill said. They also need coolers to keep their leftover produce from spoiling.

At Big River, a one-acre farm costs \$800 for a season, which includes space in the vegetable cooler. That amount includes a series of classroom c

ourses taught in St. Paul during the winter as well as considerable instruction in the field.

Immigrant farmers are discouraged from trying to plant too much land at Big River because of the work involved in farming by hand.

"Free is not good, too cheap is not good, because we're trying to teach budgeting," Hill said.

By the time the sun was high in the sky, chasing shadows from the crops, Gaabane was still at work harvesting his radishes.

Farm Manager Aaron Blyth had agreed that very morning to buy 160 bunches from Gaabane for the CSA boxes.

"He'll be out here until the sun goes down," Hill said of Gaabane, a committed farmer who works steadily all day. "So for his first year and on a quarter acre, he is doing pretty well."

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Big River Farms video and Media links

- 1) Big River Farms Video, Sept 2010

Check MFA's website at <http://www.mnfoodassociation.org>

Or on You Tube at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pJggKbLXJlk>

- 2) National Public Television America's Heartland Story on Hmong Farmers in Minnesota, Sept 2010

http://www.americasheartland.org/episodes/episode_610/hmong_farmers.htm

- 3) MN Public Radio Mid-Morning Talk, Dec 22, 2010, with MFA Executive Director Glen Hill and Kathy Draeger, adjunct assistant professor of agronomy and plant genetics at the University of Minnesota and farmer in Big Stone County, MN.

<http://minnesota.publicradio.org/display/web/2010/12/22/midmorning1/>

- 4) MN Public Radio, Jan 7, 2010, audio and text on Immigrant Farmers and Scaling up the Local Food System, with Glen Hill and May Lee and Mhonpaj Lee of Mhonpaj's Garden

<http://minnesota.publicradio.org/display/web/2011/01/07/immigrant-farmers-ground-level/>

- 5) Harvest Food Journal. Vol 1, Issue 2 June – August 2011. Magazine article about MFA's Training Program

http://harvestfoodservice.com/wp-content/uploads/2011/07/HARVEST-v1_i2_low_res.pdf

- 6) Star Tribune Newspaper, Sunday, October 9, 2011. Immigrant Farmers Plant Seeds for a New Life.

<http://www.startribune.com/local/east/131176568.html>

- 7) Pioneer Press Newspaper, Thursday, October 13, 2011. A Growing Concern. (about MFA's training program) http://www.twincities.com/localnews/ci_19101044

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BIG RIVER FARMS

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