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Latino Farmers and USDA Agents Talk About Challenges to Access and Use of USDA Programs

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Abstract

According to the U.S. Census of Agriculture, 25% of Missouri Latino farmers and rancher stopped farming and ranching operations from 2002 to 2007, even though the population of Latinos was increasing across the state. One possibility was that Latino farmers and ranchers were not effectively accessing USDA support programs. In order to better understand this dramatic decline in the number of Latino farmers and ranchers and to identify ways to improve access and use of USDA programs by Latino farmers and ranchers, 30 farmers and ranchers and five USDA agents were interviewed in southwest, Missouri. Factors such as cultural influence, English communication, insufficient network connections, poor business literacy and a lack of technical knowledge on farming and ranching, constrained the farmers and ranchers from maintaining a productive and sustainable relationship with the USDA. These factors were mentioned by all of the individuals interviewed. In addition, they agreed that one of the main challenges is to create a communication bridge that begins to explore and analyze Latino farmers and ranchers qualifications for access and use of USDA programs. This bridge may facilitate a better understanding of the need for Latino farmers and ranchers to access and use USDA programs, as well as improve their understanding of programs and services offered by the USDA. Improving relationships between Latino farmers and ranchers and USDA resource agencies can assist these producers with establishing and growing their enterprises, as well as influence the Latino farmers and ranchers socioeconomic integration into the broader community.

Keywords: Latino farmers, agriculture, USDA programs, integration

Introduction

Kandel and Cromartie (2004) observed that non-metro Hispanic growth in the 1990's was much greater than previous decades and has spread throughout the Southeast, Midwest, and Northwest. They also noted that by 2000, for the first time, half of all non-metro Hispanics lived outside the Southwest, increasingly in areas of the Midwest and Southeast. According to the latest U.S. Census of Agriculture (2007), there were 444 Latino farmers in Missouri, a decrease of 37 percent, compared to the number of Latino principal operators (703) reported in the U.S. Census of Agriculture in 2002. Garcia and Marines (2005) argue that predicting an accurate number of Latino farmers and ranchers is difficult because of factors such as: 1) missing names from USDA mailing lists; 2) limited or no knowledge of agricultural censuses; 3) language and illiteracy problems; 4) apprehension about the USDA; 5) immigration status; 6) *presta nombres*; 7) informal farming arrangements; and 8) farmers as farm-workers. These factors were mentioned as possibly influencing an incorrect count of Latino farmers and ranchers in the U.S. Census of Agriculture. An under-count was evident in our field work when we interviewed more Latino farmers and ranchers in just one county, compared to the number listed in the whole 2007 U.S. Census of Agriculture.

There is limited socioeconomic research on Missouri's Latino farming and ranching community. Few research studies exist that explain how Latino farmers and ranchers interact with the institutions that serve rural Missouri. In a qualitative study conducted by Garcia-Pabon and Lucht (2009), among three Missouri Latino dairy and one cattle breeding operation, observed that with the exception of the federal dairy subsidy program (which Latino farmers learned about through their milk processor), the operations were not generally aware of the services provided by agencies such as the University of Missouri Extension, Department of Agriculture, Risk Management Agency, Federal Grant Programs, Natural Resource Conservation Service, Farm Service Agency, and other non-governmental orga-

nizations. Additional constraints were observed by Swisher et al. (2007) who investigated the needs of small-scale Hispanic/Latino farmers and ranchers in the United States. They analyzed data from USDA service providers and Latino farmers and ranchers in six states including Missouri. Major constraints identified included: 1) Latino farmers and ranchers not knowing about USDA programs; 2) finding it difficult to qualify for programs when they were able to apply; 3) USDA agencies not able to locate Latino farmers and ranchers; and 4) the inability of USDA agencies to adequately communicate with Latino farmers and ranchers. Accordingly, Latino farmers said that they did not know where to seek information and how to market their products. Many of these farmers said they lacked equipment, good quality land, and infrastructure that kept them from expanding their operations.

Our research proposed to explore the challenges that Latino farmers and ranchers faced, identify issues USDA agencies need to overcome in order to establish a path to greater socioeconomic performance, and greater overall interaction between Latino farmers, ranchers and USDA agencies.

Methodology

In order to learn what constrained the interaction between USDA agencies and Latino farmers and ranchers in Missouri, we conducted in-depth interviews with four USDA agents and one University Extension rural service provider. In addition, 30 interviews were conducted with Latino farmers and ranchers in Southwest Missouri, mainly in Barry and Newton where the 2007 U.S. Census of Agriculture reported a total of 12 and 14 Latino principal operators, respectively.

We explored formal and informal connections to local networks in the Latino community that operate in counties, such as non-profit organizations like churches and Latino social organizations. We also explored their connections to for-profit organizations such as radio stations and Mexican restaurants in the area. We designed an interview instrument and conducted interviews with 30 Latino farmers and

ranchers. Using a snowball approach to connect with other farmers, we were able to find all participants within a 40-mile radius. Latino farmers and ranchers were interviewed in four counties.

A second interview instrument was developed to investigate the perspectives of University Extension and USDA agents in regard to improving the use and access of USDA programs by Latino farmers and ranchers. Interviews with Latino farmers and ranchers were conducted in Spanish, recorded, transcribed and translated into English. Interviews with agencies were conducted in English, recorded and transcribed.

A total of 35 interviews (30 farmers and ranchers and 5 agency interviews) were coded and analyzed using NVivo 9 software.

Findings

The Latino farmers and ranchers in this study were primarily immigrants from Mexico. Three farmers reported being born in Texas. Twenty-eight were legal residents of the U.S. and most of them, 83 percent, had been farming and ranching for 10 years or less. Eight farmers said that they farmed on 10 acres or less, while seventeen said that they farmed and ranched on farms between the sizes of 11 and 30 acres. Five farmers indicated that they owned a farm larger than 30 acres. Twenty-eight raised livestock while two said that they engaged primarily in farming activities. Income from farming and ranching activities among most of these farmers (63 percent) was 10 percent or less of their total household income. Eleven farmers mentioned that more than 10 percent of the total household income came from their farming and ranching activities.

There were five main factors that need to be improved in order to increase the role of Missouri Latino farmers and ranchers in the agri-food production industry.

The first factor we found was that the ranchers and farmers were culturally influenced to farm and ranch, but a lack of understanding between Latino farmers and ranchers and USDA agents about each other's cultures inhibited interaction. Latino farmers

and ranchers are not acculturated to U.S. production methods, and USDA agents do not understand the work culture of Latino farmers and ranchers. USDA agents identified culture as a barrier to accessing Latino clients. One agent stated, "Well, and it would help me to learn more about their culture too, so that we have a better understanding."

We found that 67% of the Latino farmers and ranchers interviewed were influenced by a tradition of farming that came from their culture of origin and previous experience in Mexico or the state of Texas. One farmer said, "I do not have a lot of knowledge; but I come from a ranch from over there in Durango, Mexico. My grandmother had cows, and we helped her out sometimes to milk or graze the cows," Another said, "I do not know, it would be almost like one says, my parent's heritage. Well, one brings them (cultural influences) here from Mexico."

Although we found the Latino farmers and ranchers to have a cultural history of farming and ranching, it should be noted that the farming and ranching practices they acquired in past locations may not be the most productive way to farm and ranch in Missouri. This is because of the differences in geography and climate.

The second factor constraining Latino farmers and ranchers from interacting with USDA agencies is English Communication. Language barriers were noted by both agencies and Latino farmers and ranchers. Most Latino farmers stated that they have very low English communication skills. A common statement was, "I speak very little English..." which means an inability to interact in a formal way. On the other hand, agents observed the need for somebody with Spanish language skills in their office. One agent stated, "There's nobody in this office who is fluent in Spanish." Furthermore, a lack of language communication might also intimidate interaction. One agent said, "I think it has to be intimidating that we don't speak the same language, you know. It's hard." Twenty-eight of the farmers and ranchers interviewed stated that they did not feel that they were able to have a conversation in English with USDA agents. Some stated that in cases where they did interact with USDA agents, they did so by

bringing somebody from their family to help with translating.

I speak very little English. I do not speak a lot and do not understand a lot of things well. You know how in these things one needs to understand well, what is being said and to know what one is going to say.

Even farmers who felt more confident in their English language skills still said they became a bit reticent when they needed to go to a public office to do something. One farmer stated, “I was scared to talk about it because there are some words that I could not understand and I know that they could not understand me.”

The third factor affecting program access is no access to networks that can connect Latino farmers and ranchers to resources and information. Both the Latino farmers and ranchers and the USDA agents agreed that not having access to the right kind of network is a barrier preventing the Latino farmers and ranchers from accessing USDA resources and programs. A significant disconnect between the realities of the USDA agents and Latino farmers and ranchers was identified. One agent said, “I’m unaware of how many [Latinos] there are, like in Newton, McDonald, right off hand. We do not have any Hispanic farmers that I know of in the area, so I don’t have that much experience with working with Hispanic farmers.” Another agent said, “I don’t know what percentage across the county would be Latino or Hispanic farmers...There are a few, there is not a large population, but there are a few.”

Latino farmers and ranchers stated that if they could access information through a formal network since it would facilitate their interaction with federal and state support programs. From our conversations with Latino farmers, 40 percent reported “access to information” as the main challenge to staying in farming and ranching. One farmer said, “For me, it is probably not having information, and not getting information from the people that should be giving it to us,” Another farmer said, “Well, because one does not have much guidance, most of all basic knowl-

edge that tells me: ‘Look! Go to this program so you can get more help.’ One does not have knowledge. That is it.”

We found that only four farmers had interacted with a formal organization in an attempt to access services and resources for their farms. However, their experiences discouraged them from continuing to interact with the formal organizations. One farmer stated:

Yes, if you have had several years doing it [farming] and need the money to continue, yes, they could help; but since we were just starting, and we were beginners--because of that, they did not give us help.

Most farmers, 96.6%, said that they don’t have any ties to formal organizations in order to access resources that could help them improve their farming. However, the farmers and ranchers said that they want to get connected to an organization that could support their activities. One farmer said, “I do not receive any type of support, but I would like to interact with organizations, that could be of some benefit.”

The fourth factor affecting program access was that the current Latino farmers and ranchers had a low level of business literacy in the agribusiness field. Both USDA agents and Latino farmers agreed that knowledge on business literacy limits the farmers and ranchers’ mutual interaction. According to one USDA agent, “I’m thinking they might not know the technical information, or they might not know the right terminology to ask when they get here...”

Poor business literacy among farmers gets even harder for the farmers to overcome when USDA agents request detailed business plans for projects they are applying for. One agent mentioned sending a farmer home to work on a business plan saying, “He [the farmer] needs a business plan, and that’s kind of what we sent him out there to work on.”

But farmers also mentioned they did not know how to formulate a business plan. A farmer stated, “I do not have it in writing, that is I have it, but it is a mental plan that I have by the experiences I

have lived.”

The fifth deterrent affecting access to USDA programs was a lack of knowledge of technical terminology on farming and ranching among Latino farmers. This also served as a constraint on interactions with USDA agencies. A USDA agent mentioned not having any experience in dealing with Latino farmers, “We just don’t get enough coming, really, to probably get some idea of what we need to do.” This lack of interaction also blocks the transfer of information and technical assistance to farmers. All the farmers and ranchers interviewed said they had never received technical assistance to improve their farming and ranching activities, or to improve their understanding of farming and ranching terminology. Their knowledge of how to effectively use farming and ranching equipment to improve farm productivity was also found to be very low. We observed that most Latino farmers, 70 percent, didn’t know the meaning of “technical assistance.” One farmer stated, “I do not know what conservation is.” Another rancher said:

Well, yes! I think so [regarding the desire for technical assistance]. For example, I would like to know more about the types of animals. They could teach us, more or less, on the different breeds. You can see here they are all cows, but they are all from different breeds. I would like to know more about other (types of breeds).

Discussion

One of the major concerns resulting from this research is the inaccurate count of Latino farmers and ranchers in Missouri. Our fieldwork confirms the difficulty in accurately counting the number of Latino farmers and ranchers reported by Garcia and Marines (2005). We noted a serious undercount in the two counties where much of our work was conducted. In one county, after just a few days, we were able to identify more farmers and ranchers that were included in the census. We interviewed 15 Latino farmers in Barry County when the census only showed 14. A more accurate estimate would be

between 45 and 60. The Latino population of farmers and ranchers is somewhat transient and difficult to reach but it is important to get a more accurate assessment of how many there are and the types of farming activities they are engaged in. If numbers are correctly counted, the appropriate resources and infrastructure can be made available. The actual number of Latino farmers and ranchers in Missouri is likely to be much higher than what is recorded in the U.S. Census of Agriculture, thus the actual decline in the number of Latino farmers and ranchers is likely much less. In addition, addressing some the factors identified in this paper may lead to an increase in the number of farmers and ranchers and their production value.

The findings are also consistent with Swisher et al. (2007) and Garcia-Pabon and Lucht (2009), in that our analysis also showed that Latino farmers and ranchers do not know about or understand USDA services. In addition, the USDA agents we interviewed were unaware of the needs of Latino farmers and ranchers. In addition, poor English communication skills and a lack of technical knowledge in farming and ranching were similar to the findings of Swisher et al. (2007).

Recommendations

Data from this study illustrate that there are a number of issues that make it difficult for Latino farmers and ranchers to access USDA programs and resources. To bridge the gap between Latino farmers and USDA programs, it may be necessary to develop and implement training programs in Spanish to increase the capacity of Latino farmers and ranchers to develop business plans, complete application forms, understand the various USDA programs, develop the capacities to qualify for USDA programs and increase financial literacy of Latino farmers and ranchers to a level where they can qualify for commercial loans. There are steps that the Latino farmers and ranchers, extension and USDA can take to begin to address these issues.

In the long run, USDA may want to consider investing in bilingual and bi-cultural outreach

agents. These agents could make formal connections between USDA agencies and Latino farmers and ranchers. This would bridge the communication and cultural gap between the two groups. If it is not possible to hire bilingual agents in the short-term, staff development programs that facilitate language acquisition and cultural understanding would be a good investment in their programs and begin to make them more accessible to Latino farmers and ranchers. A better understanding of the needs of the Latino farmers and ranchers is another important step in becoming more accessible. Identifying potential brokers, people who can facilitate access to the farmers and ranchers, introduce them to their operations and facilitating conversations, would help USDA get to know this new community of producers and better understand their needs. It may also increase the comfort level of the farmers and ranchers to the point that they may seek assistance and services.

Latino farmers and ranchers would benefit from forming some sort of network of Latino farmers and ranchers that can serve as a connecting point for both the farmers and ranchers and the resource people. The network can represent the collective interests of the farmers and ranchers and make their case to USDA. Improving their English language skills is also important to the farmers and ranchers. It can be difficult to find effective English language-learning resources in rural areas, but in order to better represent their own interests and increase their capacity to sustain and grow their businesses, learning English is an important part of their development process. This is particularly true in rural areas where access to resources and markets can be more constrained.

Extension can play an important educational and bridging role. There is additional research that needs to be done to better understand the business capacities and objectives of Latino farmers and ranchers. Educational programming can be developed and implemented that increase the capacities of the Latino farmers and ranchers and teach them how to more effectively produce and sell their products. In addition, extension educators can use their understanding of the USDA programs that Latino

farmers and ranchers can benefit from. They can play an important role by serving as a point of contact and educational support for the Latino farmers and ranchers and facilitate access to the USDA agents and staff that can provide the resources these farmers and ranchers need to grow and sustain their enterprises.

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