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Production, Yield, and Market Analysis of Produce Raised by Minnesota Hmong American / Immigrant Farmers

Prepared in partnership with
Farmers' Legal Action Group, Inc. (FLAG)

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I. Project Summary

Farmers' Legal Action Group, Inc. (FLAG), is a 25-year-old nonprofit law center dedicated to providing legal services and support to family farmers and their communities in order to help support family farmers' livelihoods and keep them on the land. Hmong American and other immigrant farmers have a prominent presence in the Twin Cities Metro Area's markets and local foods production. Unfortunately, the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) administers programs, particularly with crop insurance, based largely on commodity crops (like corn and soybeans), or other commonly grown crops—not based on the vast variety of vegetables grown by Hmong American farmers, such as bitter melon, Thai eggplant, and Chinese long beans.

In an effort to accommodate smaller-scale or specialty crop growers, the USDA's Farm Service Agency (FSA) offers financial assistance to producers of non-insurable crops through the Noninsured Crop Disaster Assistance Program (NAP). However, many immigrant farmers are reluctant to apply to NAP, primarily because of time constraints and literacy barriers. These obstacles make it difficult and sometimes impossible for immigrant farmers to participate in NAP, making them more susceptible to economic hardship if disaster strikes.

Throughout the harvest months of 2011 (July-September), the student Research Assistant (RA) collected yields, production, and market data for crops commonly grown by Hmong American farmers in the Twin Cities Metro Area. The project's intent was to fill in the gaps in the Minnesota crop table in order to establish a basis for Hmong-American and other immigrant farmers to more easily

gain eligibility for FSA crop insurance. Access to crop insurance and other farm programs will make it possible for these low-income farmers to more quickly recover from disasters and ensure a more comfortable and profitable livelihood.

II. Goals and Objectives

There were two primary objectives driving in this project:

1. To calculate average market prices for crops commonly grown by Hmong American farmers (and not included on the Minnesota crop table). The RA would then create an excel spreadsheet documenting this information, including original data collection and trends in crop prices.

- The goal of obtaining this information is to provide information to the Minnesota FSA office concerning average market prices of undocumented crops, since NAP payments are calculated in part by using 55% of an average market price (FSA Fact Sheet, p. 3).

2. To obtain detailed acreage and production records from eight Hmong American farmers in the Twin Cities Metro Area who expressed interest in participating in NAP and to compile these data into a working excel document.

- The production information and any obstacles in obtaining these data would then be reported to the Minnesota FSA representative.

III. Methodology

The study aimed to track market price trends and also to obtain production and acreage records for crops commonly produced by Hmong American farmers in the Twin Cities Metro Area. First, a list of 23 crops was identified as the key crops grown by Hmong American farmers in the Twin Cities Metro Area that are currently not included in the Minnesota crop table. This list was compiled with the help of the Minnesota Food Association, an association committed to providing education, training, and technical assistance to immigrant and minority farmers in the Greater Twin Cities Metro Area. These 23 crops were to be tracked throughout the growing and harvest season to determine information about the yield, production, and market price of each crop. (In the absence of detailed production records and market price information, the FSA cannot determine eligibility for insurance). The list of 23 was eventually pared down to a list of 16 due to the general absence of these crops at the farmers' markets. The 16 key crops are listed in Table 1 below:

Table 1

16 Key Crops
Amaranth
Bitter melon
Bitterball, mini
Bitterball, regular
Chinese long beans
Cucuzza Squash
Gailon/Chinese Broccoli
Hmong corn
Hmong cucumber
Hmong Greens/Yu Choy
Malabar Spinach
Pea Greens
Potato Leaf
Thai eggplant
Water Spinach
Winter Squash Leaf

Next, a list of Twin Cities’ farmers’ markets was determined based upon which markets might be the most useful for the study. In the end, six different markets were chosen as the locations for field research based on moderate to high presence of Hmong American sellers and the 16 key crops. These markets included: St. Paul Farmers’ Market, Midtown Farmers’ Market, Minneapolis Farmers’ Market, Hmongtown, Unidale Market, and the Brooklyn Center Market.

Over a three-month period, the RA visited each of these six farmers’ markets on eight different weeks for a total of 48 market visits. She located as many of the 16 crops that were present and calculated the average price per pound by weighing three of each crop (per market) and determining the average of the weights. Because these farmers do not sell their crops by weight, each crop was weighed as it

was to be sold, e.g. a “bunch” of yu choy or a “tray” of Thai eggplant, to determine the price per pound.

At the beginning of the harvest season, the RA accompanied Hli Xyooj, Staff Attorney and Hmong Community Outreach Coordinator at FLAG, on farm visits to the plots of the eight prospective NAP participants, which were located in Wright and Dakota counties. The purpose of these visits was to establish a relationship between the farmers and the RA and to determine which of the 16 key crops were being grown at each farm. At the end of the harvest season, the farmers were to submit their production records to the RA.

IV. Problems with Obtaining Data

Two sets of issues arose when obtaining data for the project—one set dealing with market-based obstacles and the other dealing with insufficient production records kept by farmers.

Issues with Market Data Research:

Throughout the data collection period at the farmers’ markets, the RA faced some minor obstacles in obtaining market data, primarily because of issues having to do with trust, language barriers, and the unavoidable variation in crop presence at markets.

- *Distrust of RA’s intentions*

Occasionally, farmers were skeptical of the RA’s intentions and would not consent to their crops being weighed. This was especially problematical

when these farmers were the only sellers of a specific crop, leaving gaps in data collection for certain market visits.

- *Language Barrier*

Many of the farmers interviewed possessed very limited English language skills. This made it difficult for the RA to communicate her intentions and to obtain consent for data collection. However, many times a volunteer translator would step in and communicate the researcher's intentions, which generally resulted in full compliance.

- *Inconsistencies in crop presence*

Inevitably, not all crops were available at each market from week to week. This led to minor inconsistencies in data collection, but overall, does not affect the reliability of the data since the data collection was spread out over the course of an eight-week period. Additionally, in a number of cases, a particular crop would be missing at one market on a given date, but would be available at another market on the same date.

Problems Obtaining Sufficient Production Data

Without a doubt, the biggest challenge during the project was obtaining complete production records from farmers. There were many reasons why farmers were reluctant and/or unable to keep the kind of records NAP requires. These issues primarily had to do with the significant amount of time that record keeping requires, the perception that the high commitment level of the application process outweighs any potential benefits from the program, and literacy barriers.

- *Time Constraints*

These farmers work long, hard hours trying to make a living by farming and find great difficulty allocating time and energy to keep up with the painstaking task of recordkeeping. Several of the farmers tracked during this study worked another full-time job in addition to farming, thereby leaving them with little free time. For example, during an interview with one farmer it was learned that she harvests only what she knows will sell at the market. The farmer noted that it would be a “waste of time” to harvest anything more; like the majority of farmers in the study, she does not have access to cold storage facilities, rendering it pointless to harvest beyond her immediate capacity.

- *Complicated Application Process*

In order to be eligible for NAP, it is necessary that all farmers keep detailed production records for a minimum of three years. Since it would take such a long time to receive any potential benefit from the program, many farmers do not view the future benefits to be worth the cost of investing the time and energy in keeping records, and therefore applications are rarely attempted.

- *Literacy Barrier*

Several of the farmers in this this study are first-generation immigrants and have very limited English and/or literacy skills. Therefore, recordkeeping may not only be challenging and time-consuming, but impossible. Unless these farmers have willing children or another form of bilingual assistance, keeping written records may simply not an option for them.

V. Key Findings

Throughout the season, most crop prices remained relatively constant, although most crops (all except for amaranth and pea greens) steadily declined in price by a marginal amount. This finding is not particularly surprising because as the season was coming to an end, many farmers were eager to sell as much as possible of their remaining harvest. The final average market prices are listed in Table 2.

Table 2

Crop	Overall Average Price Per Pound
Amaranth	\$0.89
Bitter melon	\$1.29
Bitterball, mini	\$1.50
Bitterball, regular	\$0.98
Chinese long beans	\$1.47
Cucuzza Squash	\$0.62
Gailon/Chinese Broccoli	\$1.00
Hmong corn	\$1.10
Hmong cucumber	\$0.62
Hmong Greens/Yu Choy	\$0.94
Malabar Spinach	\$0.98
Pea Greens	\$1.88
Potato Leaf	\$0.84
Thai eggplant	\$1.29
Water Spinach	\$1.20
Winter Squash Leaf	\$1.25

It is the hope of this project's participants that this information be used as a benchmark for the FSA in the calculation of crop payments so that its program can be responsive to all of its participants.

VI. Suggestions for Further Research

Because FSA requires a minimum of 3 years of recordkeeping for farmers to become eligible for insurance coverage, it would be tremendously helpful for FLAG and other community organizations assisting Hmong American farmers, such as the Association for the Advancement of Hmong Women in Minnesota (AAHWM), to receive funding for additional studies like this one. Having researchers on the ground recording initial acreage measurements with the farmers and periodically collecting production records throughout the season would ensure that records be accurately kept and critical FSA deadlines met. These organizations could offer the farmers assistance in recordkeeping during the first year and train the farmers to take records themselves in subsequent years, decreasing barriers to participate in NAP. The training assistance provided should increase the likelihood that farmers continue to keep records. The existing organizations are endeavoring to accomplish these goals now but have limited resources.