

College: Reedley College
Location: Reedley, California
Practice: Specialty Vegetable Marketing Tour
 Helping Asian American farmers overcome language and business barriers

<i>Year Started</i>	1998
<i>Budget</i>	\$1800 annual grant
<i>Program Participants</i>	100
<i>College FTE</i>	6,200
<i>Target Sector</i>	Specialty vegetables
<i>Staff Size</i>	2
<i>Structure</i>	Reedley College provides supplies, transportation, and infrastructure support
<i>Key Outcomes</i>	Network among farmers resulting in joint purchase of a van to transport produce to markets Contracts secured at lucrative market

Introduction

Many rural areas have large populations of recent immigrants who came for jobs in labor-intensive agriculture or manufacturing. Language and other barriers, however, often hamper their ability to succeed.

Southeast Asians have migrated in large numbers to California's San Joaquin Valley in recent decades. A large proportion of these immigrants are Hmong (natives of Laos). Many pursue agricultural endeavors, either as full-time farmers or to supplement their income from other sources, but find it difficult to market their products in the American wholesale and distribution network. As part of a larger effort to increase self sufficiency and earning potential for the region's immigrant farmers, the

Specialty Vegetable Marketing Tour, operated by Fresno County's Reedley College, seeks to address this problem by taking the farmers on marketplace tours to gain experience and contacts in California's produce markets.

Community Background

Located in the San Joaquin Valley, Fresno County's population has been growing faster than the national average, adding more than 12 percent from 1990 to 1997. Much of the increase came from international migration, principally from Central America and Southeast Asia, and large families among these recent immigrants. Unfortunately, job growth has not kept pace with population growth

Program focus	Sector specific	Economic conditions	Economic base			Target populations
			Mfg	Agr	Svc	
Business services and training	Yes	Stable	13	2.2	33	Minorities

<i>Service Area</i>	<i>Fresno County</i>
<i>Total Population</i>	754,000
<i>Median Household Income</i>	\$28,000
<i>% Below Poverty Level</i>	28.1
<i>% Unemployment Rate</i>	13.0
<i>% Minority Population</i>	46.4
<i>% Rural Population</i>	17.0
<i>% High School Graduates</i>	66.2
<i>% College Graduates</i>	16.9

in the valley. With much of the population growth coming from unskilled immigrants and their offspring, the region is troubled by persistent poverty and unemployment. Unemployment rates in Fresno County averaged 13.5 percent during 1999, much above the national average.

Unemployment is especially prevalent among racial minorities, mainly Hispanics and Southeast Asians, who tend to rely on seasonal farm labor as their chief source of employment. Some estimates place the unemployment rate among Fresno County's Hmong population at nearly 75 percent.

Although Fresno is classified as a metropolitan county, nearly 20 percent of its 786,000 people live in rural areas. Many of the rural people are farmers, and an increasing number of the farmers—approximately 1,000 at last count—are Asian Americans. These Asian American farmers tend to rent rather than own their farms, and tend to work small plots. In fact, Asians operate approximately one-fifth of the county's small farms (those with less than \$100,000 in annual gross returns).

They also tend to produce a variety of specialty products from their homeland, crops such as daikon, tatsoi, and gai choy, among others. Although a tiny component of total U.S. produce sales, specialty produce is on the rise as the number of immigrants for whom these products are staples grows and as the products make their way onto American dinner plates. Consequently, the potential for producers of these exotic vegetables is also rising.

Program Specifics

Reedley College, one of the San Joaquin Valley's two community colleges, is in Reedley, 30 miles from the city of Fresno. It offers a diverse array of

courses, including agricultural, technical, and transfer courses leading to various certificates and associate's degrees. Total enrollment at the college is about 6,200 FTEs, including students at the main and satellite campuses. The college has a 300-acre farm adjacent to its main campus and a 600-acre forest nearby.

The Specialty Vegetable Marketing Tour offered by Reedley's Landscape, Agriculture and Natural Resources Department targets Southeast Asian, small farmers. Its goal is to help them overcome the obstacles they face in bringing their products to market.

The process of securing sales in large market-places entails substantial interaction with wholesalers, retailers, and consumers. These interactions require a level of comfort with the language and the business culture that many Asian farmers do not possess. And that is where the tour comes in: providing first-hand experience in an arena where classroom knowledge is not nearly as beneficial.

The tours, which are conducted once a year, take Asian farmers to farmers' markets in San Francisco or Los Angeles to learn about wholesaling and retailing. An agriculture instructor from Reedley leads the tour with the help of an interpreter.

Once in the market, the group visits various sites and meets with businesspeople and representatives from the produce industry who tell them about the business aspects of the vegetable industry and advise them on market trends. For example, one representative counseled the farmers on negotiating tactics. Another talked of the importance of developing long-term business relationships and the need to understand what wholesalers and retailers are looking for. The representative, for example, told farmers to pack produce into smaller packaging, making the produce less intimidating to retail (and especially non-Asian) buyers.

Throughout the tour, farmers are encouraged to take a more proactive role in selling their products. One way to do that is through the formation of a common, or cooperative, label. In response to that advice, several Hmong farmers developed their own produce label, called Hmong American Cooperative of Fresno Fresh Vegetables. The president of the cooperative said that the tour "served as an eye-opener" by bringing farmers in contact with buyers.

A relatively inexpensive program, the tour costs \$1,800, including bus charter and salaries for staff and interpreter. Of that cost, \$1,000 comes from a State Central Community College District

Foundation grant and the remaining \$800 comes from district expenses. The tour is provided to the farmers free of charge since most qualify for low-income tuition waivers and financial aid.

Outcomes

Approximately 100 farmers have taken the tour. In each of its two years, the tour has been filled to capacity. A third tour is planned for 2001. According to the cooperative extension agent for Fresno County,

Several of the farmers are now selling at some of the farmers markets that we have visited [on the tour]. Everyone who has gone now has a better understanding of the market system and they have developed contacts whereby they can sell their produce.

Indeed, as a result of the tour to Los Angeles, three farmers secured contracts to sell their produce to the Santa Monica farmers' market, one of the most lucrative markets in the country. And as a result of the San Francisco tour, a group of Hmong farmers purchased a van to transport their produce directly to market, rather than place it on consignment with packers, resulting in significant increases in sales and revenues.

In addition to the economic returns, the program also serves to introduce many small-scale farmers to Reedley College and can serve as a stepping-stone to other agricultural education courses.

Strengths, Challenges, and Replicability

This program is an example of a low-cost practice that has both the short-term benefit of helping immigrant farmers improve their marketing strategies and the long-term benefit of plugging them into the college's agricultural extension activities.

Reedley College's vegetable marketing tour shows that large scale practices do not have a monopoly over innovation and effectiveness—small scale investments and programs can reap significant outcomes.

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