

Exploring the Role of Latinos
in the
Western North Carolina Food System

Prepared for
the Appalachian Sustainable Agriculture Project



by

Laura D. Kirby
James Blair

March 2007

One of the most significant demographic trends in Western North Carolina (WNC) in the past decade has been rapid strong growth in the number of residents of Hispanic or Latino origin. The total population in the region grew by 17% from 1990 to 2000 but the fastest growing ethnic group was Latinos. The number of persons of Hispanic/Spanish/Latino origin increased from 5,342 to 29,106 over the decade.¹ Still, they represent only a small portion of the region's total population at just under 3%.

Several groups have examined the influence of Latinos on the region's economy and industry. In 2003 the North Carolina Department of Agriculture initiated a study on the market potential for Hispanic cheeses in the region. In 2005 researchers from the University of Georgia examined the buying power of Hispanics in North Carolina and throughout the nation. And in 2006 a team of researchers from the University of North Carolina released a report describing the economic impact of the state's growing Hispanic population that identified potential business opportunities provided by this fast-growing market.

The Appalachian Sustainable Agriculture Project (ASAP) has identified at least four ways that the Latino community intersects with the food system in WNC.² "Food system" refers to the entire spectrum from food production, processing and distribution to consumption. ASAP is a nonprofit organization dedicated to strengthening the local food system as a way to help sustain farms and farming in the region. The four areas of overlap involve:

- **Farmworkers.** Latinos represent the largest source of farm labor in the region right now.
- **Farmers.** Farm owners and operators of Hispanic origin are a significant and growing part of agriculture in the U.S.
- **Markets.** Latino-owned food stores and restaurants represent potential markets for locally-grown food and farm products.
- **Consumers.** The nearly 30,000 residents of Hispanic/Spanish/Latino origin are potential consumers of local farm products.

In the fall of 2006 ASAP initiated a survey of organizations working with Latinos in Western North Carolina. The Coalicion de Organizaciones Latino-Americanas (COLA) is a regional coalition of grassroots and non-profit Latino-led organizations and agencies working with the Latino community. Collecting information from COLA member organizations rather than directly from Latino farmers, farm workers and business owners was a way to overcome practical constraints associated with data collection – time and resource constraints as well as language barriers. This approach means that information must be interpreted with caution. A further limitation of the survey is that it did not measure consumer perceptions about local food or demand for local farm products in any way.

For the survey, representatives from seven COLA member organizations were interviewed over the phone and asked questions about Latino-owned tiendas and restaurants in their communities, issues affecting farm workers in the region, and perceived interest among Latinos in managing or

¹ 2000 Population Census. US Bureau of the Census.

² For this research, Western North Carolina is defined as the 23 counties included in the Advantage West region, one of seven economic development regions in North Carolina.

owning their own farms. Results are summarized according to topic and are supplemented with state and national statistics.

Farm Operators

Although more than 90% of farm operators in the United States are white, the number of Spanish/Hispanic/Latino farmers is increasing. The number of these farmers reported on the USDA Census of Agriculture increased from 20,956 in 1992 to 61,094 in 2002. Table 1 shows how the number of Spanish/Hispanic/Latino farmers has changed nationally and in North Carolina from 1992 to 2002.

	1992	1997	2002	% Change (1992-2002)
North Carolina	131	320	739	+464%
WNC	n/a	48	199	+314%
United States	20,956	27,717	61,094	+192%

Source: USDA Census of Agriculture

These are not farm workers, but farm operators who own or lease land to produce food and other farm products. Part of the explanation for this trend is that sometimes farm workers enter into agreements with farm operators to purchase a farm when the children of the farm operator are not interested in maintaining the farm business.³ Latino farmers thus represent an important group of replacement farmers as older farmers retire.

According to the USDA, the average age of farmers has also been on an upward trend. The age of farmers has gone up every year since 1978 and the national average in 2002 was 55.3 years of age. The average operator age in 2002 was higher than the national average in all but three of the 23 counties of WNC. Nearly a third of North Carolina Cooperative Extension (NCCE) agents working on agriculture issues in the region named the aging of the farm population as one of the top issues affecting the region's farm sector.⁴ When asked to rank how prevalent different categories of replacement farmers are in their communities, the NCCE agents ranked Latino farmers last of five categories. The other categories were, in order, lifestyle farmers, organic farmers, retirees and then next-generation farmers.

In this survey of Latino organizations, respondents were asked to rate interest among Latinos in their communities in becoming farm owners or managers. Only two respondents rated interest as high, three rated interest as low, and two were not able to answer. Language and cultural barriers and documentation status were the most frequently reported barriers to Latinos owning or managing their own farms, followed by access to capital, cost of land, lack of knowledge or information and lack of transportation.

³ *Number of Latino Farmers on the Rise Across the U.S.* July-August 2004 *Attra News*. National Sustainable Agriculture Information Service, USDA.

⁴ *A Survey of NC Cooperative Extension Agents in Western North Carolina*. 2007. Appalachian Sustainable Agriculture Project: Asheville, NC.

Farm Labor

A recent estimate is that more than 8,000 migrant and seasonal farmworkers work on WNC farms during the harvest season, pruning and cutting Christmas trees and hand picking apples, strawberries, cucumbers and other fruits and vegetables.⁵ These include seasonal workers who live in the region but typically work non-agricultural jobs at other times of the year, and migrant workers who move from place to place based on harvest requirements. Most migrant and seasonal farm workers in WNC come from Mexico. According to the Institute for Southern Studies, approximately 10% of migrant and seasonal farmworkers in North Carolina participate in the H2A Agricultural Worker Program, a federal program that provides for non-residents to legally work in the U.S. for four to six months each year.

North Carolina is the nation's largest participant in the H2A program, accepting 6,500 legal migrant farmworkers in 2005.⁶ Under the program laws, farmers who employ migrant workers must provide a minimum standard of hourly pay that is federally determined each year, housing that meets prescribed standards for temporary labor camps, compensation for work-related injury and illness, payment for at least three-quarters of the employment period offered under contract, and reimbursements for transportation costs to and from the U.S. Grower applications to participate in the program must be filed 45 days in advance of the anticipated worker start date. The program requires that farmers actively recruit domestic workers before employing immigrants.

What is the H2A Agricultural Worker Program?

The H2A Agricultural Worker Program is a federal program that provides for non-residents to legally work in the United States for four to six months each year. The program is designed to help meet the need for seasonal, or temporary, farm labor. North Carolina is the nation's largest participant in the H2A program, with as many as 8,000 to 10,000 workers hired each year through the NC Growers Association. While individual growers can arrange to hire H2A workers on their own, most choose to work with the association – for a flat fee of around \$900 per worker – because of its familiarity with program policies and practices.⁷

Most H2A workers in North Carolina come from Mexico, where a migrant worker can earn enough pay in one season to support his family for the entire year. Many workers that participate in the H2A program belong to the Farm Labor Organizing Committee (FLOC), a labor union that has represented migrant farm workers in North Carolina since signing a contract with the NC Growers Association in 2005.

Under the program laws, farmers who employ migrant workers must provide a minimum standard of hourly pay that is federally determined each year, housing that meets prescribed standards for temporary labor camps, compensation for work-related injury and illness, payment for at least three-quarters of the employment period offered under contract, and reimbursements for transportation costs to and from the United States. Grower applications to participate in the program must be filed 45 days in advance of the anticipated worker start date. The program requires that farmers actively recruit domestic workers before employing immigrants.

⁵ Larson, A. *Migrant and Seasonal Farmworker Enumeration Profiles Study: North Carolina*. 2000. Migrant Health Program, Bureau of Primary Health Care: Health Resources and Services Administration.

⁶ *NC Farming has a Labor Crisis*. October 20, 2005. Greensboro News Record.

⁷ Personal communication, Tony Macias at Student Action with Farmworkers.

According to representatives from the seven Latino organizations surveyed, family and personal issues are as important as working conditions in terms of challenges facing farm workers in the region. Family and personal issues include housing, medical care, education, language, and documentation status. Among work-related challenges, more than half of all comments by survey respondents focused on safety, mostly concerning pesticide exposure and related safety equipment and information. Other issues not named by survey respondents but understood to be challenges facing Latino farm workers in this region include racism, low wages, limited options for jobs when the growing season ends, a lack of legal protections and other problems related to the fact that farm workers are excluded from minimum wage laws and some Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) regulations that cover other types of workers.⁸

Latino-Owned Businesses as Potential Markets for Locally-grown Food

Survey respondents estimated that as many as 45 Latino-owned restaurants and 75 tiendas are operating in the seven counties where they work. Many items that could be produced by the region's farms – apples, cabbages, cucumbers, peppers, tomatoes, squash, cheese, fresh meats and others – are among the items survey respondents named as typically offered in these establishments. In the remaining counties of WNC there are likely dozens more of these establishments, though traditional methods for finding business listings are not useful in generating a list. The online directories Whitepages.com and Yellowpages.com, for example, revealed only 28 tiendas in the entire region.

Overall, survey respondents described Latino business owners as interested in buying local farm products, but price was named as a significant barrier. Other barriers included availability and quality as well as relationship issues, of which language was one. It is important to note that these barriers were perceptions of Latino organization representatives and not barriers actually reported by potential buyers of local farm products.

Conclusion

This research was mostly exploratory, with the goal of identifying and understanding issues important to how the Latino community intersects with the food and farm economy in Western North Carolina. It is part of a larger research project whose goals are to assess the region's food and farm economy with a focus on expanding local markets for local farm products.⁹

Other than the large number of Latino-owned businesses, there was no evidence that those establishments represent a strong potential market for local farm products. More research is needed, though the fact that ASAP's Local Food Campaign has not targeted Latino consumers in the region means that demand for local food may not be strong in those markets. It may be appropriate to expand the campaign with information in Spanish to reach Latino consumers.

Aside from markets, issues of farm labor and farm ownership are central to building a strong local food system in the region. Whether Latinos will be a significant group of replacement

⁸ Personal interview, Molly Hemstreet with the Center for Participatory Change.

⁹ See "Local Food System Research", www.asapconnections.org.

farmers in this region is not clear from this research. The research does identify at least some barriers that would need to be addressed in order for that to happen.

The most important outcome of this research is to identify some issues of significance for farm workers in the region. Labor represents one of the largest inputs for producers in WNC, particularly fruit and vegetable growers, and attention to those issues will be important to maintaining a strong and successful local food system in the region.