



The price tag for 'cheap food' is too high.

Most U.S. agricultural workers — predominately Latino immigrants — live well below the federal poverty line.¹ Their exploitation as low-wage labor props up the conventional food and agriculture system and perpetuates a cycle of poverty and related health challenges (childhood obesity, diabetes and hypertension) among those hard-working individuals and their families.

That's just for starters.

Monoculture farming practices, industrial-scale livestock confinements and feedlots are depleting soil nutrients and poisoning our waters. Increasing problems with superweeds and superpests² and virulent foodborne illnesses threaten our ecosystem and public health. And no amount of chemicals can stave off the devastating effects of climate change-induced drought.

Sustainable? Not even close.

We can do better.

Main Street Project's nonprofit mission is to transform systems that perpetuate inequities. That's why we're building a Minnesota prototype of a more resilient food and agriculture system that breaks down barriers to equal participation — and is socially, economically, and ecologically sustainable:

1

Creating economic opportunities for low-income immigrants and rural communities — not just agribusiness.

2

Producing safe, affordable, and naturally nutritious foods, free from antibiotics and chemicals.

3

Using energy and natural resources more efficiently to lower production costs, reduce environmental impacts and adapt to climate change realities.

Sustainable by design.

Our diverse but integrated agricultural system model has more than fourteen symbiotically connected agricultural products — including perennial crops, grains, vegetables and value-added products.³

Natural, free-range poultry is at the heart of the system because of its benefits to the land — think manure instead of chemical fertilizers. Poultry has a short turnaround or life cycle and is culturally familiar to many immigrant families.

Because year-round production and income are critical, we adapted our poultry building design to mimic free-range conditions in cold-weather months with a large indoor solarium that rarely requires additional heat.

Our system is accessible for beginning farmers and designed to scale up to meet increases in market demand and income potential:

- Farmers or 'agripreneurs' can raise three to four flocks a year on a one-half acre production unit.
- Eight production units can be combined to form a four-acre farm or economic unit that can support a family.
- Eight farms form an economic cluster that can support community-based enterprises like processing, feed, transportation and manure management.



Growing prosperity.

Latinos are the fastest growing minority population in the Midwest — up 75 percent over the last decade in rural and urban Minnesota, Iowa, the Dakotas, Nebraska, Kansas and Oklahoma alone.⁴

Nationally, Latinos are 30% likelier to become entrepreneurs than established populations of previous immigrants.⁵

In 2009, the Partnership for Southern Minnesota Regional Competitiveness Project recognized immigrant-led, small-scale sustainable food production as an opportunity for future regional economic growth.

But in Minnesota, over 24% of Latinos live in poverty, compared to less than 12% of all Minnesotans.⁶ Despite the potential, they're faced with multiple structural barriers to participating in a new agricultural system: lack of access to land, traditional financing, market resources and support infrastructure, and culturally compatible training.

Our new system is designed to break down those barriers by providing a continuum of support and resources for aspiring farmers, making it possible to walk a path out of poverty toward prosperity.

NEW FARMER TRAINING

In 2011, we co-developed a Spanish-language farm-business training curriculum in a popular education format. From the first class, 21 agripreneurs graduated; our third class began in February 2013.

FARM INCUBATOR EXPERIENCE

To support new training graduates, we developed a unique, hands-on program in 2012 that includes business planning and production coaching, financing and market connections, and transitional access to production units at multiple farm sites. Additional incubator sites are being developed to meet trainee demand.

FINANCING

The Grow a Farmer microloan fund was launched in 2012 as a resource for incubator participants. No-collateral loans help finance upfront costs of chicks and feed as new farmers-in-training raise their first flocks.

LAND ACCESS

We're working with the Cannon River Watershed Partnership to facilitate land use agreements between Rice Creek landowners and incubator graduates ready to launch their own farm operations. These arrangements will serve as models for farmer/environmental partnerships in other communities and regions.



Collaboration is key to system expansion.

Widespread adoption of our model will reverse the trend of agricultural degradation of our ecology, increase system resiliency and reduce poverty.

Scaling up means working beyond the local agripreneur training program to tackle remaining challenges: increasing training delivery capacity, attracting program-related investment, rebuilding farmer-accessible community infrastructure, conducting additional agronomical, ecological and economic research, and adapting and replicating the model for other communities and regions.

Institutional partnerships and collaborations are the surest way to bring needed expertise and investment to the challenge. Here are some of the partnerships that are helping build system knowledge, readiness and expansion potential:

- AgStar Financial Services, Neighborhood Development Center (St. Paul), and the Southern Minnesota Initiative Foundation are part of efforts to identify models for cost-effective poultry processing, financing options, and land access.
- Local colleges are helping to document system environmental impacts such as water absorption and retrieval capacity, carbon sequestration and soil fertility.
- The Institute of Agriculture and Trade Policy facilitates community conversations on long-term progress indicators with low-income trainees and their families.

REFERENCES

1. Food Chain Workers Alliance, June 6, 2012
2. Josie Garthwaite for NYTimes.com, Oct. 5, 2012
3. See mainstreetproject.org for list of system products
4. U.S. Census, 2010
5. U.S. Small Business Administration, 2008
6. American Community Survey, 2011