

After the Incubator: Land Access for Farmworkers on the Path to Proprietor

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A summary of *After the Incubator: Factors Impeding Land Access Along the Path from Farmworker to Proprietor*, by Adam Calo and Kathryn Teigen De Master, published in the Winter 2015–2016 issue of the *Journal of Agriculture, Food Systems, and Community Development*, 6(2), 111–127. See the full paper at <http://dx.doi.org/10.5304/jafscd.2016.062.018>.

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What is the issue?

In California's Central Coast, historic land arrangements and resource access patterns have favored large-scale producers who rely on a low-wage, devalued workforce, and on immigrant workers.

The farmworker communities often face food insecurity, hunger, and health injustices. Farm incubators are one beginning farmer initiative supported by the USDA Beginning Farmer and Rancher Development Programs (BFRDP) that are attempting to provide a path for farmworkers to become farm owners by reducing their risks and enhancing their viability. However, upon completion of these programs, some farmers find that they are relegated to farming on marginal land with insecure lease agreements, and they often end up having to return to the farmworker pool. These issues highlight that in addition to challenges such as access to land or startup capital, factors such as ethnicity, cultural identity, language and other relational factors can be barriers for farmworkers seeking to transition to independent farming.

What were the study's objectives?

This study addresses the often-overlooked issue of social constraints that impede land access for farmworkers aspiring to independent farming in California's Central Coast region. While issues such as skill-building, education, and access to capital have received much attention when examining this issue, sociocultural factors—such as cultural

identity and complex social relationships—have often been ignored or dismissed. Programs that address problems with farmland access often focus on the economic viability of beginning farmers, for example by lowering start-up costs.

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However, the long-term interactions that beginning farmers must navigate, such as identifying viable farmland or signing a lease, are often not considered. This study, therefore, widens the lens that is used to define access. It focuses on how social mechanisms and a wide range of people—from farmers to landlords and real estate agents—work together in the context of regulation and policy. Specifically, the authors ask the following question: “how do social relationships impede land access for former immigrant farmworkers aspiring to independent farming in California's Central Coast region?”

How was the study conducted?

The authors of this study took a qualitative approach, using case study analysis. Initially, two focus groups were conducted to generate research questions and themes. These focus groups included farmer liaisons, farm incubator participants, and farm incubator staff (from one incubator and one land and resource nonprofit). Once the research question was identified, a network-sampling approach was used to select interview participants. The goal of the sampling technique was to interview a range of beginning farmers with insight into the transition from farm

laborer to proprietor. Of the 33 in-depth, semi-structured interviews that were conducted, 26 were with beginning farmers and seven with incubator and organizational staff members. Of the 26 farmers, 19 were current incubator program participants and seven were independent farmers. Twenty-one of these farmers were former immigrant farmworkers, eight were women, 18 were men, and all were under the age of 50 and had been farming fewer than 10 years. Most of the interviews with farmers were conducted in Spanish; the remainder were in English. Seven staff members of the farm incubator and nonprofits were interviewed to triangulate the sample. Questions asked in the interviews focused on the individual's farming history, motivations and goals, challenges and opportunities associated with transitioning from the incubator program, the process of farmland identification, and the farmer's experience of leasing and managing land owned by somebody else.

In addition to the focus groups and individual interviews, ongoing participant observation was used to understand the farmers' daily experiences. Researchers also attended meetings and presentations given by farm incubator representatives. These experiences were recorded and used to inform conversations, resulting in detailed narratives from the participants.

Key findings

Researchers found that gaining access to California's Central Coast farmland as a new-entry farmer entails more than motivation and skill, as there are numerous barriers that must be overcome. Complex social relationships between beginning farmers, landowners, officials and others affect how successful beginning farmers will be in accessing land. Factors affecting these relationships include landlord-tenant relations, lease arrangements, and race relations. Many aspiring farmers expressed a desire for independence, and some a preference for organic methods. The challenges that prevented them from reaching these goals included finding start-up capital, land availability, and relational and sociocultural issues.

The authors suggest that one potential strategy for increasing the success rate of farmworkers transitioning to proprietorship may be emphasizing and scaling up elements of the cooperative structure found in farm incubator

programs, such as:

- **tax incentives** to encourage landowners to rent out small parcels of land to beginning farmers;
- **collaborative ownership** of large equipment and irrigation systems;
- funding of an **on-site distributor** who manages individual yields in order to meet the needs of larger business contracts; and
- a **central cooling and storage facility**.

Fostering new models for land-based cooperatives outside the incubator farm structure may be more effective than encouraging rugged independence.

Additionally, the barriers that these findings identify signify a need to change to how agricultural land is accessed, such as a renewed examination of the public-good role that agricultural land plays during regional planning conversations, or rezoning and place-based land tenure reforms.

The authors' findings suggest that various land access barriers need to be addressed structurally. It is important to recognize that factors affecting the success of beginning farmers are context-specific, and therefore comparison cases are very instructive. Future research should include considerations on how new farmers will emerge, and under what social, economic, and ecological structural conditions will they strive; how the impact of incubators can be increased; and how fairness should be ensured when much of the power in this relationship dynamic still lies with the landowner. Finding successful ways to promote the long-term success of independent, small-scale farmers may be key to addressing the increasing consolidation of farms and disappearance of American farmland.



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