Differences in Hispanic Agriculture before and after the Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA)

Historically, Hispanic farms were concentrated in a few “Gateway” states. Throughout the 1980s, 80% of Hispanics were concentrated in the border/coastal states from Texas to Washington, plus Colorado and Florida. However in the 1990s, the number of Hispanic farms outside this border region increased and the geographic distribution of Hispanic farms transformed from a regional to a national phenomenon.

Of 3,128 counties in the 50 States, 589 counties (19%) had Hispanic farm operators in 1982. By 1997, Hispanic farm operators had spread across the nation to 1,777 counties (57%). (Based on published Ag. Census counts, counties with less than three Hispanic farms may be showed as zero.) The top maps show the change in number of farms. The maps on the second row show the expansion of Hispanic operated farmland across the entire country. The percentage change in acreage is even greater than the change in number of farms.

One explanation for this change is the Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA) of 1986, which grants amnesty to undocumented workers who had been living in the U.S. since 1981. Traditionally, the agricultural sector relies heavily on migrant and seasonal workers, especially from Mexico. Some might have stayed in the country illegally. IRCA of 1986 allowed them to legalize their status. Once they established their permanent residence, not only would they come out from hiding and be accounted for in the Census, but also they could move around the country where they could purchase land and apply their farming skills.

In addition to the amnesty provision, IRCA has two other sets of provisions that are specifically for agriculture. One is the Special Agricultural Worker (SAW) Provision, which allows farm workers, who worked a minimum of 90 days in perishable crops during 1985, a chance to legalize their status under SAW. That in turn provides an opportunity for them to become permanent U.S. residence. The other is the Reemployment Assistance Workers (RAW) Provision that took effect in 1996. RAW assures the agricultural sector to continue draw alien workers in case the specific work is for agricultural workers. One is the Special Agricultural Worker (SAW) Provision, which allows farm workers, who worked a minimum of 90 days in perishable crops during 1985, a chance to legalize their status under SAW. That in turn provides an opportunity for them to become permanent U.S. residence. The other is the Reemployment Assistance Workers (RAW) Provision that took effect in 1996. RAW assures the agricultural sector to continue draw alien workers in case the specific work is for agricultural workers.

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NRCS Service to Hispanic Farmers

To meet the requirements of the Government Performance Reform Act, NRCS established the performance tracking system called PRMS. This system is designed to capture the information of conservation assistance that the agency provides. Included in the system is information of each client's race or ethnicity. The table below is based on the First Time Customer Parity report data from PRMS, for Puerto Rico. The second column in this table shows the number of Hispanic farm operators assisted by NRCS in FY 2000. NRCS has provided assistance to 8,265 Hispanic farm operators, which accounts for about 30% of all potential Hispanic clients (third column from the 1997 Ag. Census). The percentage of Hispanic clients served is the fourth column.

In Puerto Rico, NRCS service to Hispanics exceeds the assistance rate of traditional clients in ten states: Arizona, California, Colorado, Florida, Hawaii, Massachusetts, New Mexico, Ohio, Rhode Island, and Texas. Seven of the eight Gateway States, which hold 80% of the Hispanic farms in the 1990s, currently meet or exceed parity in outreach to Hispanic operators (using the 10 point parity buffer). Thirty-five of the other 42 states are under that 10 point parity buffer. In FY2001, again only ten states exceeded the Parity ratio for Hispanic clients. Outreach opportunities exist for those other states, which are receiving this recent wave of Hispanic operators.

A quick glance at the maps below shows definite opportunities for NRCS to increase assistance to Hispanic farmers, especially, since the post-IRCA era when Hispanic farmers’ spreading across the nation happens to be consistent with the post-1986 Food Security Act (FSA) era. Since 1986, USDA has been providing financial incentives through loan programs to promote land stewardship. The share of Hispanics participating in conservation programs is low, but increasing rapidly. How can we take the opportunity to develop outreach strategies and program policies to further increase their participation?