

**MIDWEST  
ROW CROP**  
COLLABORATIVE

# **GROWING OPPORTUNITY: BUILDING SOCIAL EQUITY INTO MIDWESTERN ROW CROP AGRICULTURE**

**SEPTEMBER 2022**

# INTRODUCTION

The Midwest Row Crop Collaborative ([MRCC](#)), with funding from the Walton Family Foundation, sought to understand opportunities for row crop agriculture that reflects equitable, positive outcomes for people. As a collaborative between leading food and agricultural companies and environmental nonprofits, MRCC's approach is informed by its membership-based structure, and geographic and crop type focuses. [Lacy Consulting Services](#) served as primary consultant for this project, bringing significant experience conducting research in BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and people of color) agriculture within the United States.

Work with Lacy Consulting Services began with a literature review on BIPOC farming and row cropping in the Midwest and across the United States. The review grounded the project with an analysis of the historical conditions contributing to the current state of agriculture and research highlighting current obstacles and future projections. This initial stage also included an assessment of key identity groups for engagement, ultimately resulting in a concentration on an underrepresented group that plays a vital role in agricultural production in the region: Latino and Latina farm owners and farmworkers. Following the initial stage, Lacy Consulting Services conducted a series of interviews with Latino farmers that served as the basis for a qualitative analysis, developed to inform MRCC's strategic planning and to guide future activities for MRCC and its members.

While there are a variety of perspectives regarding preferred terms, like Latino/a, Hispanic, and LatinX, the authors of this report opted to use the term Latino for consistency and in recognition of its prominence.<sup>1</sup>

As regenerative agriculture is understood to enhance the well-being of people in the food system and the environment, MRCC seeks to advance approaches that deliver benefit to communities impacted by Midwest row crop agriculture. The goal of this study is to better understand the needs and barriers facing Latino farmers and farmworkers, focusing on agricultural workers in row crop production in the Midwest, not inclusive of other types of agricultural workers such as those working in the dairy or meat processing industries.

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<sup>1</sup>Noe-Bustamante, L. et al. (2020). *About One in Four U.S. Hispanics Have Heard of Latinx, but Just 3% Use It*. Pew Research Center.

# LATINO FARMWORKERS AND FARM OWNERS IN THE MIDWEST

Latino farmers and farmworkers contribute to one of the largest and fastest growing minority identity groups in U.S. agriculture.<sup>2</sup> Between 1992 and 2007, the number of Latino operated farms increased by more than 200% in Kansas and Michigan, with a 110% increase in Minnesota.<sup>3</sup> Currently, a third of U.S. farmers are over the age of 65 and, as this generation enters retirement, young farmers and ranchers have a prime opportunity to establish land ownership.<sup>4</sup> With 400 million acres expected to change hands over the next decade and—assuming government aid continues to be made available to support new and beginning farmers and ranchers—a new, more demographically diverse generation is particularly well-positioned to grow their footprint in U.S. agriculture in the years to come.<sup>5</sup> However, among those working in the agricultural system today, there are still marked demographic differences between those who own farms and those who operate them without ownership—while Latinos represent 83% of U.S. farmworkers, only 3% of primary producers are Latino.<sup>6</sup>

Over the past few years, there has been growth in research that examines the experiences, needs, and gaps of underserved BIPOC farmers, but information pertaining to the case of Latino farmers in the Midwest continues to be scarce. The existing studies show that challenges facing Latino farmers include overcoming language and cultural barriers, the perceived complexity of the arrangement between USDA and the farmer, and limited contact with Cooperative Extension Services and other USDA partnerships and services, all resulting in limited trust of these entities.<sup>7</sup> Organizations committed to serving Latino farmers, like the Latino Economic Development Center (LEDC) which works in the Midwest to grow entrepreneurs, are yielding encouraging results in providing both social and financial support to farmers pursuing business ownership.<sup>8</sup> Successful efforts in this area demonstrate the importance of deep engagement, culturally relevant partnerships in program administration, and BIPOC representation within organizations.

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<sup>2</sup>Fry, R. (2008). *Latino Settlement in the New Century*. Pew Hispanic Center Report.

<sup>3</sup>Martinez, Rubén, Dilshani Sarathchandra, Paul Babladelis, and Steven Miller. (2016). *Latino Farmers in Michigan: An Overview*. JSRI Research Report No. 58. East Lansing, Michigan: The Julian Samora Research Institute, Michigan State University.

<sup>4</sup>Census of Agriculture. (2019). *Farm Producers*. United States Department of Agriculture.

<sup>5</sup>O'Connor, J. (2020). *Barriers for Farmers and Ranchers to Adopt Regenerative Ag Practices in The US*. Patagonia; Thapar, N. (2020). *An Enormous Land Transition is Underway. Here's How to Make it Just*. Civil Eats.

<sup>6</sup>Census of Agriculture. (2017). *Farm Producers*. United States Department of Agriculture.

<sup>7</sup>García-Pabón, J. E. L., & Lucht, J. R. (2009). Latino farmers in Missouri: Risks, services, and implications for Extension. *Journal of Extension*, 47(4), 1-7.; Martinez, J.; Garcia, V. (2004). *New Latino Farmers in the Midwest: The Case of Southwest Michigan*. Michigan State University. Proceedings of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Annual Conference, Latinos in Missouri: Gateway to a New Community.

<sup>8</sup>Blanco, V. *Latino Economic Development Center: Stronger Together*. Bush Prize for Community Innovation.

## METHODOLOGY

To the narrow this project's scope, the research began by focusing on one identity group in the Midwest. Latino row crop farmers and farmworkers were chosen as central to this research in acknowledgment of the increase in farmers identifying themselves as Hispanic, Latino, or of Spanish origin by the 2017 USDA Census of Agriculture, and to complement research underway by other organizations focused on equity in agriculture.<sup>9</sup> As research progressed, the limited number of Latino row crop farmers in the Midwest became acutely visible and, as a result, MRCC and Lacy Consulting Services expanded its potential pool of Latino interviewees to include any type of farming within the Midwest.

Qualifier characteristics, or screening criteria, were used to ensure interviewees had the required expertise and background to provide meaningful dialogue. To improve participation in these interviews and conduct research equitably, Lacy Consulting Services and MRCC provided payment for one hour of time to the interviewee. The map below showcases the geographic distribution of people interviewed in this study. Of these interviews, three individuals represented farmworker organizations and most interviewees identified as Latino farmers. Some of the leading experts in Latino agriculture reported only being fluent in Spanish or felt most comfortable communicating in Spanish. Lacy Consulting Services addressed this language barrier by hiring a Spanish-speaking interpreter and facilitator to hold interviews in Spanish, which allowed for additional experts to contribute to the report. For the purposes of this report, the interviewees' identities are kept anonymous.

In the interview analysis, Lacy Consulting Services staff employed Grounded Theory methodology to assess themes and identify concepts that accurately represented interviewees' rich and nuanced responses. In this process, staff examined emerging and existing relationships among themes.



<sup>9</sup>USDA NASS. 2017 Census of Agriculture.

# GOALS FOR LATINO FARMERS AND FARMWORKERS

## Socioeconomic stability

When describing collective goals for Latino farmers and farmworkers, respondents emphasized the pursuit of socioeconomic stability and providing for their families through agriculture. This stability in life may include sustaining families in the U.S. after immigrating, as well as supporting families in their home countries.

## Equal opportunities

Another shared goal among Latino farmers and farmworkers was the desire for equal opportunities. This included rights for equal pay, healthy and safe working and living conditions, as well as access to markets for their products.

## Generational legacy

Respondents also noted that being able to maintain and pass down their family's farming tradition was one of the collective goals of Latino farmers and farmworkers.

### INTERVIEW INSIGHT

*"They sometimes come to this country themselves, sometimes they travel with their whole family, so their goal will be to sustain the family here, in the United States, but also send money back to their home country to sustain the families there."*

# STRENGTHS AND ASSETS

## Traditional knowledge and experience

Most respondents highlighted how Latino farmworkers often bring with them diverse knowledge, skills, and experiences including holistic farming techniques and familiarity with practices associated with regenerative agriculture. For many agricultural workers, their personal knowledge derived from previous experience in their home countries offer lessons and insights on how to grow and manage crops.

Respondents also identified Latino farmworkers' cultural approach to labor as an asset to agriculture in the U.S., in particular highlighting the appetite many Latino farmworkers have for greater self-determination in their experience with agriculture.

### **INTERVIEW INSIGHT**

*“Many times, [the best solutions] are not always the typical technologically focused way. There are a lot of holistic ways...a lot of different types of approaches. A diversity of perspectives on how to care for a crop, how to grow it, how to address diseases, how to fertilize...would be very, very useful in this country—[learning from] another country’s way of growing.”*

## **INFLUENTIAL DYNAMICS**

### **| Growing connections and community**

When reflecting on the dynamics most impacting Latino farmers and farmworkers, a majority of respondents noted the growing Latino population in the rural Midwest as a significant benefit to other Latino families entering the agriculture field. Aligned with this growing population, respondents also mentioned a pronounced increase in visibility of Latinos in agriculture, supported by more public story sharing about personal experiences in various formats.

### **| Increasing opportunities and outreach**

When discussing important positive trends, most respondents alluded to the presence of increasing initiatives for in-person and online outreach programs and the corresponding increase in participation of Latino farmers in these events. Respondents identified improvement in access to opportunities for basic operating loans for Latino and other underrepresented groups in agriculture.

## **BARRIERS FOR LATINO FARMERS AND FARMWORKERS IN THE MIDWEST**

### **| High costs associated with business**

A critical barrier for Latino farmers in the Midwest is the high operating cost required to acquire land and run a successful business, making it unaffordable for beginning Latino farmers. Those farming row crops tend to have the resources and acreage available to justify significant investments like combines, planters, and tractors.

### **INTERVIEW INSIGHT**

*“The amount of land and the price of land that you need to start a row crop farm is much, much higher than the amount of land and the price that you would need to start a diversified direct marketing farm institution kind of farm. It’s also where we see a lot of beginning and young, emerging farmers and BIPOC farmers, start out: with three acres and a CSA. Then, a lot of them also don’t want to do row crops because [they’ve had] historically low prices for the past eight years or so.”*

### **INTERVIEW INSIGHT**

*“On any given day you’re looking at a total balance sheet of a row crop farmer in the millions of dollars. Where are you going to find an immigrant minority farmer who—without having inherited or without having married into those resources—even has a chance of ever achieving a balance sheet of that nature?”*

## **Racism and disdain toward immigrant workers**

Respondents identified the public’s negative attitudes and treatment of immigrants as key barriers for farmworkers in the Midwest, making specific mention of the perception that Latino farmers and farmworkers are “taking jobs away” from others.

### **INTERVIEW INSIGHT**

*“There’s a lot of disdain for H-2A visa workers...the sense that they’re getting more than what they deserve, and there’s a lot of feeling [stirred up] anytime that anybody says that the H-2A visa system needs to be reformed.”*

## **Limited access to markets**

Most respondents described the lack of direct access to markets as a barrier for Latino crop growers. Respondents noted Latino farmers frequently depend on a ‘middle person’ due to difficulties gaining trust and low negotiating powers to sell their products themselves.

## **Language barriers**

Respondents identified that language barriers and the delivery of information in English alone limits the ability of many to fully understand and navigate systems effectively.

Spanish itself is not the first language for some Latino farmers and farmworkers, and effective engagement across communities requires the use of tailored communications strategies and materials personalized for their intended audience.

#### **INTERVIEW INSIGHT**

*“If we’re looking at Latin America, what we saw during the pandemic is that a lot of our farmers shared advisories and notifications, they printed out information for their farmworkers. Well, it’s hard when they don’t even know how to read that. Even if you put it in Spanish, that’s not their native language. So, language is a huge barrier.”*

## **OPPORTUNITIES FOR ACTION**

### **Development of supportive communities and networks**

In considering potential actions to support Latino farmers and farmworkers, respondents emphasized that building a trusting and supportive community is important in making a safe and welcoming environment in the Midwest. The benefit of making such an investment is significant. With the development of these communities, rural areas are well-positioned for further economic growth; agricultural-based communities that have managed to reverse sustained trends of population loss have often experienced diversifying demographics and a notable growth in immigrant communities.

### **Support for access to land, capital, and technology**

Stakeholders committed to regenerative agriculture should consider the transition of farming operations as an opportunity to scale regenerative agriculture practice by encouraging opportunities for the next generation of farmers and supporting land access. The ability of companies and non-governmental organizations to engage in this work directly may vary, but partnership-focused models hold promise.

#### **INTERVIEW INSIGHT**

*“The other side of that is creating public-private partnerships to create hubs of farmland access, and farm creation. If we’re thinking about farms as businesses and not as this yeoman farmer patriotic ideal, then we can start thinking about creating economic hubs in the same way we do digital corridors and medical alley. These could become regions where people know they can go as Latino farmers, as Somali farmers, and young farmers, and that they will have support because the community has invested, and they want them there. I think that would be a great use of money.”*



## CONCLUSION

The key findings of this study center on the challenges confronted by Latino farmers and farmworkers in the Midwest, and the difficulties they experience in entering and navigating a heavily embedded system that favors established farm owners. These barriers include the significant initial cost of land acquisition, as well as high amounts of capital required to purchase operating technology and equipment to run a viable business. For many Latino farmworkers, their immigration status restricts their ability to access grants and loans, and they may experience cultural barriers including difficulties with language and communication, overt racism, and implicit bias that contributes to their sense of safety in farming communities in the Midwest.

There are many opportunities to build and sustain trust between Latino farmers and other stakeholders in the Midwestern agricultural landscape, especially with planned activities informed by thoughtful use of this report's findings. Although trust may be lacking between many institutions and Latino farmers and farmworkers, there remains opportunity for relationship-building underpinned by meaningful action. The Midwest Row Crop Collaborative in their relationships with farmers, implementing partners, and policymakers, are working to support landscape level change and the people responsible for the scaled adoption of regenerative agriculture. They seek to aid planning that contributes to the success of historically underserved and emerging farmers entering row crop agriculture, reinforce the well-being of rural communities through local ownership and stewardship of working lands, and provide an opportunity to support a resilient, regenerative future for farming.



# ABOUT THE MIDWEST ROW CROP COLLABORATIVE

## *Scaling Solutions for Agriculture and the Environment*

The Midwest Row Crop Collaborative is an innovative partnership aligned to drive positive environmental change across the Midwest landscape and the Mississippi River Basin. Formed in 2016 and comprised of leading businesses and nonprofits spanning the full food and agriculture value chain, MRCC works to catalyze systems change solutions through a range of public and private sector partnerships. Members collaborate by tackling systemic barriers to scaling regenerative agriculture, developing and implementing cutting-edge pilot projects that substantiate the water, air, and soil benefits of climate-smart agricultural practices and pave the way for broader change in the agricultural system.

While MRCC serves as a platform to catalyze impact through collaborative projects, MRCC's ambition for system-wide impact extends beyond the combined footprint of its membership, and its members uphold that collaboration and shared learning are key elements to transformation. To further realize this ambition, MRCC members develop and test new approaches to increase productivity while ensuring soil health, protecting water, addressing the factors contributing to climate change, and supporting farm families.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This report's development was supported by funding from the Walton Family Foundation and its contents informed by interviews with generous contributors, whose participation was instrumental. Environmental Initiative, as administrator of the Midwest Row Crop Collaborative, thanks the members of the Midwest Row Crop Collaborative's Steering Committee and Lacy Consulting Services for their collaboration and expertise.

### 2030 Goals

MRCC has three goals aligned with its shared ambition for a regenerative agricultural system and with recognition of the scale and urgency needed to achieve it.

1. Ensure 30 million acres in the Midwest employ practices that support improved outcomes for soil health, greenhouse gases, water quality and use, biodiversity, or farmer livelihoods.
  - » At least 1 million of these acres will demonstrate multiple measurable regenerative outcomes.
2. Reduce net on-farm greenhouse gas emissions in the Midwest row crop supply chain by 7 million metric tons.
3. Directly support at least 30,000 Midwestern farm operations in the transition to regenerative agriculture.