

Farmer Startups? How Incubators Are Helping Small, Sustainable Farms Take Off

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Training farms known as incubators are helping immigrants and others get into farming. But Congressional wrangling over the Farm Bill has put their future in question.



Preparing vegetables. Photo by Alleen Brown.

Mai Yang, a student from a local college, helps Denia Arias prepare vegetables for the market. Photo by Alleen Brown.

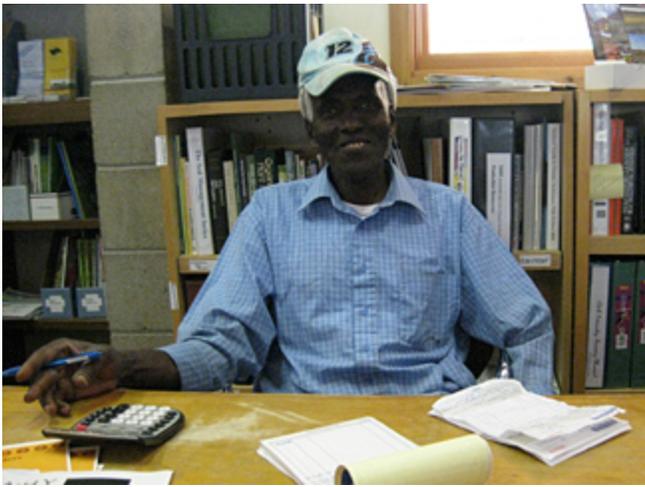
It's midmorning on a Thursday and it's quiet at Big River Farms in Minnesota's St. Croix River Valley. The van has already left for Minneapolis to deliver boxes full of vegetables harvested yesterday by an unusual group of farmers-in-training: immigrants from Laos, Liberia, Burma, Guatemala, Ethiopia, and Somalia.

Offering farmers a plot of land gives them an opportunity to practice production and marketing in real time.

One of those immigrant farmers, Mohamad Gaabane, bends over a calculator in the farm's dimly lit office. He spends a lot of time doing this kind of thing: adding up sales, recording which vegetables he has harvested, photocopying seed packets, and mapping out the meticulously planned one-acre plot of land he rents from a nonprofit organization that advocates for local food, the [Minnesota Food Association](#). The paperwork is not what he loves about farming, but the training he's received here at Big River Farms, which is operated by the MFA, has driven home the point that this tedious work will be essential if he wants to move out of the program and start a farm on his own land.

Gaabane has made sacrifices to do what he loves. Most days, he drives an hour from Minneapolis to tend his vegetables, and an hour home. It's not unusual for him to go straight from the farm to his job as a janitor in a hotel.

He's not in farming for the prestige—he says his neighbors in the Somali community thought he was crazy when he started. And he's certainly not in it for the cash. Factoring in gas, program fees, and



Mohamad Gaabane in the office. Photo by Alleen Brown.

equipment purchases, farmers at Big River earn as little as \$1,500 in a season; a few earn much more, but many earn less. It's not nearly enough to compensate for months of farm labor.

Gaabane shrugs. "The finances are not good, but right now I'm happy."

And as he walks outside to wash a tub full of vegetables, there's something about the breeze, the position of the clouds in the sky, and the way the cabbage heads bob in the water that explains Gaabane's happiness.

"You get to live in the world in a very intimate way," said farm manager Aaron Blyth. "Anyone who loves life would love farming."

Without the support of Big River Farms, it's unclear whether someone like Gaabane—whose English, income, and familiarity with U.S. food systems are limited—would be able to break into commercial farming and do so sustainably. The fact is, in a food economy that favors the big and industrial, it's difficult for anyone to successfully start a small, sustainable farm.

According to the [U.S. Department of Agriculture](#), the majority of crops in the United States are produced on farms that are bigger than 1,100 acres. Most farms keep plants alive using [pesticides](#) and [fertilizers](#) that damage ecosystems, harm human health, and contribute to global warming. Chemical use is encouraged by corporations like Monsanto, whose genetically modified seeds produce plants that can withstand the heavy use of weed-killing herbicides, which in turn discourage the farmer from growing diverse crops. The Environmental Protection Agency says [eight percent](#) of greenhouse gas emissions come from agriculture—and that's not even counting the exhaust emitted as farm products are [transported](#) back and forth across state and international borders.



Mohamad Gaabane washes cabbage for market. Photo by Alleen Brown.

Programs like the one in which Gaabane participates, known as incubator farms, seek to chip away at that system by providing resources for individuals to start small and sustainable farms.

The Minnesota Food Association has been advocating for local food for 30 years and working with immigrant farmers since 1998. For a fee, Big River Farms provides new Americans a plot of land, access to farm infrastructure, and extensive training in organic production and the business of farming.

The [Community Supported Agriculture](#), or CSA, that the program runs serves as a market for the farmers' produce. But growers are encouraged to also seek out farmers markets, wholesalers, and restaurants that will expand their individual businesses.

In communities across the U.S., local food leaders are envisioning farm incubators as a step toward a food system that today exists only on the margins: one made up of smaller farms that use fewer chemicals, in which food travels shorter distances between farm and table, and that is accessible to low-income people and people of color. Fueled by an increase in government funding for farmer training programs and encouraged by consumer interest in sustainably produced food, incubator farms are popping up across the country.

Although the training and land access programs are not silver bullets, advocates hope injecting more well-trained small farmers into the market will force an antiquated and ecologically unsound food system to groan and creak its way into shape. Whether a Congressional stalemate over the federal farm bill will stymie that effort is an open question.

Boosting the odds

New farmers make up a smaller proportion of all farmers today than they did 30 years ago. In 1982, 38 percent of farmers had been farming for fewer than 10 years; in 2007 that figure was 26 percent. (The USDA is set to come out with updated numbers in winter 2014.)

Most farmers make very little money in their first years. In 2011, less than a quarter of beginning farmers sold more than \$25,000 worth of farm products, yet the average farmer who made between \$25,000 and \$30,000 invested more than \$800,000 in their business. Not surprisingly, most beginners support themselves with some other type of nonfarm work, but they still put in long hours on the land, 20 hours per week on average, which varies significantly depending on the season.

The truth behind these numbers is that no "average farmer" exists. Each one has distinct goals, faces different pests, and works within a unique geography. But the USDA data hints at how tough it is to get started. Quality information about the success and failure rates for small farms is hard to come by, but it's certain that the challenge of keeping such a business afloat causes many farmers to flounder, and prevents many more from ever taking the leap.

Eva Agudelo hopes that farm incubators will boost growers' odds. She runs the [National Incubator Farm Training Initiative](#) out of The New Entry Sustainable Farming project at Tufts University in Massachusetts. The initiative provides consultation, training, and other resources to the new incubator farm programs springing up around the U.S. Agudelo said all of the farms the incubators nurture focus on environmental sustainability to some degree.

"Becoming a farmer in this economy, doing the kind of farming that we're doing, makes sense in a future where oil has gotten so expensive that we can't actually use it anymore," Agudelo said. "We're not there yet, so it's still challenging for small-scale farmers to compete with the industrial food system."

NIFTI counts 105 farm incubators in North America that provide land to farmers in training. Twenty-seven of them are still in the planning phases, and many more have been operating fewer than three years. More than half serve immigrants and refugees, but others serve a range of new farmers, from college-educated youth to career-changers to elders looking for retirement income.

Incubators are appearing in communities as diverse as the farmers they support. The [Northeast Organic Farming Association](#) of New Jersey is in its first year of training farmers on its incubator site. In [North](#)

Carolina, four incubator programs are in the works as part of a statewide [10% Campaign](#) that encourages consumers to spend a portion of their food dollars on local products. Wisconsin's [Farley Center for Peace, Justice and Sustainability](#) started its incubator program in 2010 and now works with both immigrant and U.S.-born farmers.

Those three programs are all supported by the USDA's [Beginning Farmer and Rancher Development Program](#). Agudelo says the creation of the development program's grants in 2008 propelled a number of incubator programs into existence.

How incubators work

If success in farming requires education, land, and money, Proeun and Amy Doeun needed all three. They lived in a mostly low-income urban neighborhood on the East Side of St. Paul, Minn. Today they are successful graduates of MFA's program, but neither Proeun nor Amy came in with a background in farming.

"I planted a bean seed, and I didn't know what that plant was going to look like when it came up," she said.

Although a few incubator programs offer microloans to participants, most aren't lenders. Many programs actually require farmers to pay a fee to participate (at the Minnesota Food Association it's approximately \$900 annually). What farm incubators do provide is education and land. Programs fill gaps in the knowledge vegetable growers require in order to maximize the razor-thin profits their farms will bring in.

"The back-to-the-land, I-wanna-dig-my-hands-in-the-dirt thing is really beautiful and pure," Agudelo said, "but [you won't succeed] if you're not prepared to make your business function as a business."



*When Nay Thoo's not in school, he helps his dad grow Asian greens at Big River Farms.
Photo by Alleen Brown.*

Offering farmers a plot of land gives them an opportunity to practice production and marketing in real time. Some programs give each farmer their own plot—at MFA sized between a quarter acre and three acres—while others offer a communal farming space.

For the Doeuns, their time at the incubator had an additional benefit: it helped them qualify for a land-purchase loan from the federal Farm Services Association, or FSA, which generally requires applicants to have three years of experience—the exact length of the program the Doeuns completed at the MFA.

A land-purchase loan is increasingly essential to getting started. [Land values](#) have surged over the past few years, partly as a result of now-declining high corn prices. Nationally, the average acre of arable land costs [\\$2,900](#), but prices vary widely, even between neighboring counties. In Washington County, where Big River Farms is located, a single acre currently [costs](#) \$9,110 on average. It's possible to rent land, but finding a plot that will support a profitable farm is tough.

To pass no farm bill at all, or another barebones extension, would almost certainly slow the

creation of small and sustainable farms.

Then there are the infrastructure and equipment costs. MFA's Aaron Blyth estimates that a commercially viable farm would require seed, a tractor or tilling implement, harvest boxes, a deer fence, a small greenhouse, a cooler, a space to wash vegetables, and a reliable vehicle.

Inevitably, access to credit is a huge barrier to new farmers. Unlike some of their counterparts at Big River Farms, the Doeuns speak fluent English—Amy is white and was born in the United States. Still, she says the couple was ready to give up on the reams of paperwork required to apply for an FSA loan, until a staffer from the Minnesota Food Association intervened on their behalf.

Now they live with their five children on a 40-acre farm located an hour outside the Twin Cities, where they raise vegetables, goats, and chickens. If the Doeuns hadn't started on the incubator, Amy says, "We never ever, ever would have had a farm."

Farm bill blues, bad news for incubators

MFA executive director Glen Hill says that what wakes him up at night is funding. Currently, earned income from farmer fees and produce sales covers only 30 percent of the incubator program's costs. Five percent comes from individual donors and other miscellaneous sources.



Minnesota Food Association executive director Glen Hill.

Photo by Alleen Brown.

The rest, a full 65 percent, is dependent on fickle grant programs. Hill says half of that grant funding comes from private foundations, which tend to be more interested in the sexy and new than the steady and sustainable. The other half comes from the government. With the farm bill stalled in Congress for a second year, Hill wonders if Big River Farms will have to scale back next season.

Last year, Congress's failure to pass a farm bill left 37 farm programs unfunded for 2013, including ones that provide grants to farm incubators. An emergency [extension](#) bill, negotiated in the heat of the melodrama over the so-called fiscal cliff, temporarily renewed many of the biggest farm programs. But it left a number of smaller ones with empty coffers, including several targeted at reform of the food system.

This year, history seems to be repeating itself. Although different versions of a farm bill have passed in the House and Senate, the two bills have yet to be reconciled. The House [version](#) fails even to include SNAP and other nutrition programs, which traditionally have been included in the farm bill. Policy experts like the [Land Stewardship Project's](#) Adam Warthesen are skeptical that a bill will pass before the current extension expires on September 30.

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Warthesen says that could mean another year of limbo for the [Beginning Farmer and Rancher Development Program](#), an important source of grants for projects that train new farmers, and one of the

unfunded 37. Besides incubator farms, the program's grants fund land-matching programs, farmer-mentor networks, and many organizations that aid traditionally underrepresented women and minority farmers. According to the National Sustainable Agriculture Coalition, the BFRDP is the only federal program dedicated exclusively to training agriculture's next generation.

Also among the [expired programs](#) are the [Farmers Market Promotion Program](#), which helps to increase opportunities for farmers to sell directly to consumers; [Value-added Producer Grants](#), which help them figure out ways to increase their profit margins; and the [National Organic Certification Cost-Share Program](#), which helps them pay the costs of organic certification. The [Outreach and Assistance to Socially Disadvantaged Farmers and Ranchers Program](#), another one of the expired programs, currently provides more than 15 percent of Big River Farms' funding.

Warthesen said that neither of the proposed bills contain significant victories for small and sustainable farmers, but the Beginning Farmer and Rancher Development Program would likely see an increase in funding if a bill passed. To pass no farm bill at all, or another barebones extension, would almost certainly slow the creation of small and sustainable farms.

The future of food

While the Doeuns have moved on to own and operate their own farm, they aren't the norm at Big River. In fact, of the 30 farmers Hill has worked with since he started at the organization in 2007, he can think of only seven who graduated out and started successful independent businesses in farming.



Selections from the garlic crop at Big River Farms. Photo by Alleen Brown.

The farmers themselves also know this. "My purpose here is to supplement a meager income from what we are doing and learning," said Kano Banjaw, a part-time translator who grew up in Ethiopia and is in his first year on the incubator. "Then, maybe, someday have my own farm outside this institution."

When you consider that some of these farmers never would have had the chance to try farming in Minnesota at all, and that [83 percent](#) of farmers nationally are white and male, one in four isn't so bad. Still, the numbers make clear the limitations of a program that incubates a business the market doesn't welcome with open arms.

"Are we just setting up farmers for failure because they cannot compete?" Hill asked. "We're not going to be able to make that transition to a different food system if we don't have food producers. Food producers are not home gardeners."

Aaron Blyth agreed. "Farming programs are only so efficient. You can't hand-feed everything," he said. "Small businesses have to make their own path."

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When it comes down to who makes the jump to owning a farm outside the program and who doesn't, Blyth said it's not only about who is the best grower. There's also a "certain amount of plain gumption" that he says farmers need to have. "Amy and Proeun have the gumption."

Besides graduation rates, MFA claims other victories. It's one of the only organically certified incubator programs in the United States, and its graduates are among the first immigrant farmers to attain organic certification in Minnesota.

"I have a bigger agenda: to take what I learned and bring it to other farmers," said Vincent Xiong, one of very few Hmong farmers in the state to be organically certified. Hmong growers make up a large proportion of the sellers at Twin Cities farmers markets, and Xiong intends to push more of them to use sustainable practices.

The Doeuns' farm is an island of sustainability surrounded by an ocean of corporate monoculture farms.

"If farmers can grow their own food, and grow food for their community, they have a kind of power that most of us don't," Agudelo said. "It's really important for people to have ownership of means of production. That's a way to take back economic power."

That big picture view can become obscured by the day-to-day economic realities faced by the farmers in question. After four years on their own land, the Doeuns are still in the barely breaking even phase. The family survives off of Proeun's full-time job driving a city bus an hour away in St. Paul.

As Amy recently wrote on her CSA [blog](#):

I am constantly surprised by the goods and bads of farm life. The amazing taste of a cucumber that has my father-in-law reminiscing about picking wild cucumbers with his parents near a creek on a mountain in Cambodia. Or the sudden sadness of coming across your favorite barn cat dead for no apparent reason. Yes, farm life is about growing, not only food but our experience of the world. It isn't always comfortable.

If nothing else, the Doeuns are a small challenge to the status quo food system, their farm an island of sustainability surrounded by an ocean of corporate monoculture farms. The island could grow, but its future depends on what happens with the Farm Bill in Washington, D.C., this month and in years to come.



Alleen Brown

Alleen Brown wrote this article for [YES! Magazine](#), a national, nonprofit media organization that fuses powerful ideas with practical actions. Alleen Brown is a Minneapolis-based writer. Her work has been published in *In These Times*, the *Twin Cities Daily Planet*, and the *The Nation*.