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## Translators bridge gap for immigrants

*Workshop teaches non-native farmers local techniques and market customs*

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The language of small farming is not universal. For those new to farming in the U.S., especially immigrants and refugees, it's hard enough to learn about different farming methods and market options, let alone in a new language.

Zenger Farm, a 16-acre nonprofit sustainable urban farm and wetland in Portland, recently presented a series of six workshops for emerging farmers in four languages - English, Russian, Hmong and Spanish. The workshops, funded by a grant from the USDA Risk Management Agency, covered soil fertility, land access, pest management, market options, farm business management, and tips on displaying merchandise and serving customers at farmers' markets.

While the information was elementary, the means of presenting it was advanced. Non-English speakers wore wireless headsets to listen to their translators, who used separate channels to simultaneously broadcast the four languages. The price of the translation equipment was about \$6,000.

But the headsets didn't stay on all the time. At the Market Options workshop, held at the farm's newly renovated 1887 farmhouse, the translators sat beside the farmers. Wisteria Loeffler, the coordinator of the Emerging Farmer Training Program, said that the equipment works equally well outside, even if translators are some distance from the students, allowing participants to go out to the field for demonstrations.

The marketing workshop drew eight eager-to-learn farmers - three Spanish speakers, two Russian speakers, one Hmong woman and a woman from the nearby Lents neighborhood who was starting a meat goat business on her five-acre farm.

"Attendance is our biggest hurdle," Loeffler said. Because of the grant cycle and the time involved in identifying multilingual farmers and their training needs, the workshop series was offered from July to early September. Next year, they plan to offer the workshops in the spring and to avoid Wednesdays, when many of the farmers are at market.

Sell, sell, sell

Laura Masterson, who operates the community-supported 47th Avenue Farm on land provided by Zenger Farm, presented a marketing workshop that encouraged participants to consider their farms as businesses.

"View your farm as a place that grows things and markets its product," Masterson said. For many non-native farmers, the idea of marketing what they grow, of acting as the grower and the salesperson, is strange.

An important distinction for the three Spanish-speaking farmers was the difference between wholesale sales and farm-direct sales. They wanted to know what is more appropriate.

"The advantage of wholesale marketing is that it requires a limited amount of time for farmers to move lots of product," Masterson explained. "The disadvantage is that you get a lower price for your product."

In contrast, she said that direct marketing eliminates the middleman. Instead, the farmer acts as the middleman, so it works best for farmers who like to work with people. From the consumer's point of view, the experience of purchasing the product directly from the farmer is often part of the product.

The advantages of direct marketing are:

- The farmer sets the price. "You decide how much to charge," Masterson said.
- The farmer gets instant feedback from customers regarding quality and price.
- The cash sales are immediate and hassle-free in terms of billing and invoicing.
- Farmers can keep a larger percent of the profit since there is no middleman.

The disadvantages of direct marketing are:

- Not everyone wants to work with the public.
- Working with people requires patience and personality.
- Farmers have to deal with marketing, advertising, customer regulations, product display and other issues.
- It can add more hours and more stress.

Things to know...

Most of the questions focused on farmers' markets. What were the advantages and disadvantages of different markets? Should they choose the larger or smaller ones? What were the prices to rent space? They also wanted to know where to turn for further advice.

"Many times we're working in the field and questions come up," said Sabino Amaro, one of the Spanish-speaking farmers.

Alexander Velikovetskikh, from Ukraine, attended with his 14-year-old son. In addition to the translator, he was accompanied by Drew Katz, an agriculture program coordinator for Mercy Corps Northwest.

Katz said that Velikovetskikh wants to sell directly to restaurants and stores. Currently he's selling to Terroir, a Portland restaurant featuring small plates and a wine bar, and he has received another order from a market in Corbett. He is farming on a small donated plot, about a quarter of an acre, near his home in Southeast Portland. But he hopes to expand to a plot out on Sauvie Island next year with assistance from Mercy Corps.

He said that the Lents International Farmers' Market intrigues him because it's smaller and international. He plans to study it to see how it works and to see if he wants to become involved.

Hmong translator Sheena Xiong interpreted for Tong Xiong, who is interested in having her own farm business specializing in vegetables and flowers. She doesn't have her own land, but is helping another established female Hmong farmer to gain more hands-on experience.

"Having interpreters at the workshops really does enable the farmer to be at ease and absorb the information instead of worrying about what it really means," translator Xiong said. "Tong has expressed that she has never been to any workshop like this before and these have broadened her way of thinking about farming."

At the conclusion of the workshop, Masterson encouraged all the participants to identify a niche market, a specialty within the larger market. She told them to consider what they can grow better than anybody else.

"Maybe you have some seed from your native countries and nobody else is growing that," she said. "Or maybe there's an opportunity for a value-added product, like a family recipe."

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