

# Extension educator keys on sustainability

Carlo Moreno helps conventional and organic farmers thrive using fewer inputs

By CAROL RYAN DUMAS  
Capital Press

University of Idaho Extension Educator Carlo Moreno has worked in far-flung parts of the world in the last 10 years, experiencing agricultural challenges that have fueled his passion for sustainability on the farm.

“Safe food should be made available to all people who need it; lowering the cost makes it accessible,” he said.

Sustainable production helps decrease the cost by reducing inputs, and in small-scale operations it tends to increase yields, he said.

Sustainability has been the focus of his work — from the salad bowl of the world in California to the impoverished Mexico-Texas border region and subsistence farming high in the northern Andes Mountains of South America.

“I like the idea of going into communities, seeing what their problems are and working together to solve them,” he said.

A couple of things he'd like to do in his current role with the university is explore cover crops for weed and pest management and work with organic growers, even though some stigma is associated with organic production and could present a bit of a challenge, he said.

“Like politics, there's a risk of alienation. But you don't necessarily have to be organic to be sustainable,” he said.

He wants to assist organic and conventional grow-



Carol Ryan Dumas/Capital Press

University of Idaho Extension Educator Carlo Moreno looks up from examining plants during a Nov. 4 cover crop tour hosted by soil and water conservation districts near Burley.

## Carlo Moreno

Age: 36

Title: University of Idaho cereal crops Extension educator, Minidoka County

Degrees: Ph.D. in Environmental Studies with a focus on agro-ecology, University of California-Santa Cruz; master's degree in entomology, University of Maryland; bachelor's degree in biology, San Jose State University

ers alike and help empower farmers to experiment to find out what works in their operations, he said.

Moreno's path to agriculture began with his interest in insects. He never really thought there was a career in insects — a notion his parents reinforced — so he started studying biology at San Jose State University.

While there, he was help-

ing out a graduate student with a project looking at the influence of annual flowering strips on the biological control of aphids in broccoli fields in the Salinas Valley. The project exposed him to agriculture and integrated pest management and opened his eyes to career opportunities.

The New York native went on to study entomology

while pursuing his master's degree at the University of Maryland.

Pursuing a Ph.D. in environmental studies with a focus on agro-ecology took him to the northern Andes in Venezuela where he worked with peasant farmers to break down barriers to production.

Trying to grow enough food to feed themselves, the farmers had switched from native potato varieties to higher-yielding varieties. But those varieties proved susceptible to invasive pests. His work there was to understand how traditional practices could contribute to management of the invasive potato pest, the Guatemalan potato moth, as well as to local farmer livelihoods.

“I learned that native potatoes are not only more resistant to damage from this invasive potato moth pest, but that they also indirectly help farm-

ers build their social capital and diversify their livelihood sources,” he said.

He worked with an innovative farmer who had a strategy to intercrop the native variety with the non-native varieties. It worked, but the other farmers had resisted the strategy, Moreno said.

“Like anything else, it's hard to change people's minds,” he said.

Returning from South America, Moreno did post-doctoral work with the University of Texas-Rio Grande Valley through a grant from the National Science Foundation to help boost organic production in the Rio Grande Valley of south Texas.

His focus was to address the major barriers facing migrant farmers along the Texas-Mexico border, one of the poorest areas in the U.S.

The area was steeped in agriculture and is a major



Carol Ryan Dumas/Capital Press  
University of Idaho Extension Educator Carlo Moreno examines plants.

supplier of winter vegetables to the U.S. Farmers there were dealing with serious pest and weed problems, and his work was mostly directed at organic practices to manage the challenges.

He sees the opportunity to work in Idaho as a chance to improve his skill set and a challenge to take what he's used in small-scale production and work with a different set of people to promote an interest in sustainable agriculture, he said.

He teamed up with the Northwest Center for Alternatives to Pesticides for the recent Organic 101 workshop in Twin Falls, at which he hoped to identify obstacles faced by organic producers with the goal of developing research and extension programs to help, he said.

He started on July 1 and is still getting his feet wet, but said Idaho is beautiful and the job is “fantastic.”

“Everyone has been very welcoming, nice and open to the idea of trying things differently, to differing degrees. I've met some really inspirational people and farmers, in what they're willing to do and the challenges they've faced in doing it,” he said.

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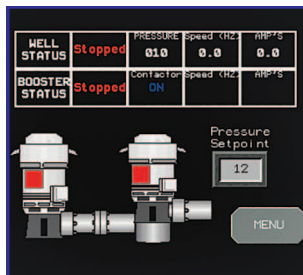
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