

The changing face of farming

Number of Hispanic farm operators continues to grow

By DAN WHEAT
Capital Press

WENATCHEE, Wash. — From humble beginnings in Mexico, Jesus Limon has spent a lifetime working hard for his slice of the American dream.

As a young man, he picked celery and oranges in California and tree fruit in Washington state. Twenty years ago he became one of the few Hispanic orchard owners in the Wenatchee area.

He and his wife of 40 years, Maria Luisa Limon, helped put their four sons through college and today see retirement in their not-too-distant future.

They now own 150 acres of apple trees and lease 35 acres of cherry and apple trees.

Growing number

Limon — pronounced “Lee-moan” — is one of about 100,000 Hispanic farm operators in the United States. Operators are defined by the U.S. Census of Agriculture as those managing daily operations. They may or may not own a farm.

The growth rate of Hispanic farm operators was still accelerating nationally in the last Ag Census in 2012.

Those numbers include up to three operators per farm, said Christopher Mertz, Northwest regional director of the USDA National Agricultural Statistics Service in Olympia, Wash. Nationwide there were approximately 67,000 Hispanic-owned farms in 2012 and 99,732 Hispanic farm operators.

Not easy being small

Depending on the type of farm, breaking into the field can be difficult, Limon said.

“I’m not sure what the deal is in California, but here in Wenatchee packing houses that are not (grower-owned) co-ops don’t accept you if you don’t produce a certain amount of fruit,” Limon, 58, said.

It costs packing houses more than it’s worth to run their lines for a few bins of fruit, and co-ops are declining in number, Limon said. That makes it tough for a new grower, starting small, to get going.

Another hurdle is the cost of land.

Orchard prices are “skyrocketing” to \$15,000 to \$20,000 per acre for the cheapest established orchards and \$18,000 for bare land where orchards are expanding in Quincy, 30 miles southeast of Wenatchee, he said.

Yet another factor, he said, is few second- and third-generation Hispanics are interested in farming.

That’s true in his family. Limon’s sons graduated from the University of Washington, Gonzaga University and Central Washington University.

The oldest, Jesus, 38, has a computer science degree and works for an airplane parts manufacturer in Snohomish County, Washington. Jose, 35, has a business degree and is manager of the USDA Farm Service Agency office in Wenatchee.

Eric, 28, also has a business degree and is a banker with Wells Fargo in East Wenatchee. Carlos, 25, just graduated in electrical engineering and works for Avista Utilities in Spokane.

Though the growth in the number of Hispanic farm operators is slowing in some states, Philip Martin, professor emeritus of agricultural and resource economics at the Univer-

sity of California-Davis, cautioned against over-interpreting changes in just five years from one ag census to the next. Longer spans need to be studied to determine trends, he said.

Age could be one factor in the deceleration, Martin said. The average age of Hispanic farm operators is 57.1 years old, barely below the average age of all operators at 58.3. More will retire as they age.

Hispanic farms tend to be small and the number of Hispanic farm operators may be affected by more spouses working off the farm, Martin said.

It’s safe to say, he said, that the number of Hispanic farm operators will increase but how fast and in what commodities and in what size of farm is hard to predict because that data is not tracked.

At just 3 percent of total farm operators, Hispanics won’t become a majority any time soon because they often lack capital and marketing ability, Martin said. He views those factors as the two largest constraints and points out that California strawberry companies often provide capital and marketing for the Hispanic growers who operate most of that state’s strawberry farms.

Humble beginnings

Jesus Limon was born on Christmas Day in 1957 in Zapotlanejo, Mexico, 22 miles east of Guadalajara.

“Everyone celebrates Christmas but not my birthday,” he said.

A Catholic, he doesn’t mind being named after Jesus Christ or being born on his birthday.

“If anyone was going to mind it would be him. No one will be as good as he was. No way,” he said with a laugh.

Limon had an older sister and was the oldest of five brothers. Their parents worked their small farm and did farm work for others. The family lacked food once or twice a month. Limon knew people who died because they couldn’t afford medical care, had no insurance and lacked access to social programs.

Their father, Jose Isabel Limon, sometimes worked in the U.S. under the Bracero guestworker program to make more money. He was working in a Glendale, California, factory when his wife, Teodora Casillas, died in 1969.

Jesus Limon was 12. He and his sister were helping their mother haul water from a well to their house. Limon got to the house first, put his buckets down and went back to help his mother. He found her collapsed on the ground from a heart attack.

“She made it through the night. The next day people made a gurney and took her to Guadalajara. She had another heart attack. I don’t know if she made it to the hospital or not before she died,” Limon said.

To the U.S.

By this time, Limon’s father had a U.S. green card — a permanent work permit — and decided to move his family to California. It took several years, bringing one or two of the children at a time through legal immigration.

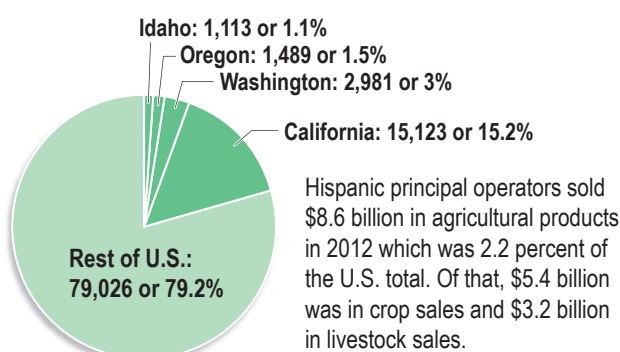
At the U.S. consulate on the border, Limon tested positive for tuberculosis and was denied U.S. entry. It was a false reading. He didn’t have TB but he had to wait a little over a year in a town there before finally gaining entry in 1974. He was 17.



Dan Wheat/Capital Press

Jesus Limon, 58, supervises his cherry harvest south of Wenatchee, Wash., in June. He’s among a growing number of Hispanic farm and orchard operators in the U.S.

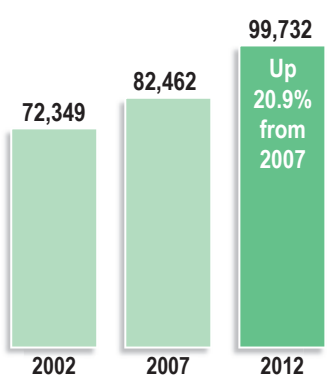
Hispanic farm operators in the Northwest and California, 2012*



Hispanic principal operators sold \$8.6 billion in agricultural products in 2012 which was 2.2 percent of the U.S. total. Of that, \$5.4 billion was in crop sales and \$3.2 billion in livestock sales.

Hispanic operators nationally*

More than one-third of farms with a Hispanic principal operator specialized in beef cattle. The second largest category was farms with no majority crop. The third was fruits and tree nuts.



*For counts of up to 3 operators per farm.

Source: USDA, 2012 Census of Agriculture

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Top 10 Hispanic operator states, 2012*

Rank	State	Operators
1	Texas	34,264
2	California	15,123
3	N. Mexico	13,195
4	Florida	6,668
5	Colorado	3,255
6	Washington	2,981
7	Oklahoma	1,749
8	Oregon	1,489
9	Arizona	1,181
10	Idaho	1,113

Likewise, Hispanic-operated farmland accounted for 2.3 percent of U.S. farmland. Eighty percent of farms with a Hispanic principal operator had fewer than 180 acres and 68 percent had annual sales of less than \$10,000.

*For counts of up to 3 operators per farm.

Source: USDA, 2012 Census of Agriculture

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‘I don’t know what the big deal is about immigrants. The constitution was written by immigrants.’

Jesus Limon

orchard owner who became a U.S. citizen in the 1990s

He lived with his father for awhile in Glendale but didn’t like city life. He worked a few seasons picking celery in Salinas and Irvine and oranges in the Coachella Valley.

He attended school only a few days in Glendale.

“Kids were reading and writing and I just couldn’t make it because of the language,” he recalled.

He met his future wife at school and they decided to run away because she was underage, just turning 18. They headed north, on their way to Canada, when they stopped in Wenatchee, decided they liked the town and stayed.

Getting ahead

Limon tended and picked fruit in several Wenatchee-area orchards and twice tried attending Wenatchee Valley College to learn English.

“I just couldn’t cut it. I started reading novels and books and picked it up faster that way. I can read it, but I can’t write it,” he said.

Three years in grade school in Mexico is the extent of his formal education.

In 1982, Limon hired on as an orchard laborer at Auvil Fruit Co. in Orondo, 17 miles north of Wenatchee. The company was founded by the late Grady Auvil in 1928. He was an industry innovator who, among other things, brought Red Haven peaches and Granny Smith and Fuji apples to the fore and co-founded the Washington State Tree Fruit Research Commission.

Limon worked his way up to foreman and then moved into management.

“Grady kind of took me under his wing. If he saw you wanted to do better, he gave

you a little push. He was a good man,” Limon said.

In 1988, Limon tried to buy stock in Auvil Fruit but couldn’t because he wasn’t a U.S. citizen. So he bought 10 acres of bare land to the north at Bray’s Landing and planted Fuji and Granny Smith apple trees.

In 1992, he obtained Farm Service Agency financing to buy 30 acres of orchard in the same vicinity.

In 1996, he quit Auvil and focused on his orchards, figuring it was the best way to get ahead.

The late 1990s and early 2000s were bad years in the apple industry because of too many Red and Golden Delicious apples. Prices were low. Growers were quitting the business.

Limon believes he was saved by switching to organic production — by accident. The owner of an orchard next to his 30 acres was growing organically and asked if he could farm several rows of Limon’s orchard as organic to prevent Limon’s conventional pesticides from drifting onto his fruit.

“I said why don’t I just farm the whole block organic and when I found out the benefits I converted my other 10 acres, too,” he said. He made more money and his workers could re-enter the orchard sooner after spraying.

In 2006, Limon purchased another 30 acres of apple orchard that had been repossessed by a bank near Quincy. In 2013, he bought 80 more acres of bare land south of Quincy, planted rootstock and budded Honeycrisp apples.

“That’s taken a toll on me. It was expensive,” he said, adding it was a \$2 million to \$2.5 million investment. The first fruit will be harvested in 2017.

Limon also manages 20 acres of cherries on a lease south of Wenatchee and leases several other 5-acre blocks of apples in East Wenatchee.

He sells 90 percent of his fruit on contract directly to Whole Foods, which has it packed by Blue Bird Inc. and Phillippi Fruit Co. in Wenatchee.

Challenges

Limon said he’s never felt discrimination from any businesses in Wenatchee but occasionally has seen it in individuals. Sometimes it can be hard to know if it’s racial or that someone just doesn’t like you, he said.

Misunderstandings from miscommunication and a steep learning curve from lack of English, education and knowledge of how American systems work can all be challenges. Limon said he’s never experienced those because of Grady Auvil’s teaching and coaching.

Workers becoming foremen and then managers and eventually buying into a farm when their bosses retire is a common way for Hispanics to get ahead, but it’s not always easy, Limon said.

“Getting guys who sell chemicals, equipment and everything else you need to open accounts and trust you will pay” and “getting warehouses to trust you will produce quality fruit” are difficulties, he said.

Long hours away from family present another challenge, but probably his greatest has been economic setbacks from bad weather or a poor economy, he said.

It’s a challenge, he said, for small growers to stay competitive, to grow big enough to keep per-unit costs down. New mandatory work breaks for workers paid piece rate is a “bookkeeping nightmare,” so he’s switching to hourly pay with a harvest bonus.

Being organic, keeping up with new varieties and selling directly to Whole Foods helps, he said.

Labor and immigration

Limon employs six to eight orchard workers year-round and hires 25 for seasonal thinning and harvesting. Domestic workers were plentiful 20 years ago but they’ve been getting harder to find every year for the last eight, he said.

In recent years, he’s hired H-2A visa guestworkers from Mexico through the farm labor organization WAFLA. He has 15 H-2A workers on a shared basis with other small growers and thinks he will need 20 next year. He built housing for 32 workers in Orondo.

“I know of a couple of guys last year who left cherries on the trees because they didn’t have pickers,” Limon said. “Guys with light cherry and apple crops will have to leave them this year. Right now, I’m not fixing trellis the way I should because I don’t have enough workers and picking cherries and thinning apples takes priority. You see weeds let go because there’s not enough time to do that.”

Beyond a tighter U.S.-Mexican border, Limon said part of the labor shortage is caused by “government not letting kids work when they are young and then when they are 18 they don’t want to work because they don’t know how.”

Youngsters can work for limited hours in orchards at 14 with parental permission and in warehouses at 16, but Limon said they should be learning at 8 or 9. They don’t have to work all day and there should be protections, he said. But they would learn to appreciate work and the money they could make if they could start earlier, he said.

Regarding immigration, Limon said the main thing that’s needed is a more efficient and faster guestworker program. It takes 90 days to get H-2A workers now and growers should be able to get workers within a few days of determining their need, he said.

A better system would be an incentive for illegal immigrants to go back to Mexico and apply to return, he said.

He also favors having illegal immigrants pay a fine and get work permits.

“It would be better if they could come in and out. Everybody wants to go back to see family but are afraid they might not get back in,” he said.

Limon became a U.S. citizen in the 1990s partly because he began serving on county and state Farm Service Agency committees. He said he votes for the U.S. presidential candidate that he figures will do the least damage. He said he’s not voting for Donald Trump because he doesn’t like Trump’s idea of deporting all illegals and that a fair amount of what Trump says he would do on other matters is unconstitutional.

Immigration has become too controversial and members of Congress don’t seem to care about it because “they are too busy being at each others’ throats,” he said.

“I don’t know what the big deal is about immigrants,” he said. “The constitution was written by immigrants.”

Thinking back over his journey and his humble beginnings when the next meal wasn’t always a sure thing, Limon says, “When you go through that and have a chance to do something, it’s a no-fail deal. It’s you’re going to make it, or you’re going to make it.”

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