

Healing Land, Collective Power

Possibilities, Barriers, and Visions of Transforming Land,
Work, and Ownership Towards Cooperative Agriculture
for Ventura County Farmworkers



Introduction

Ventura County is one of the largest agricultural producing counties in the nation. Farming in our community is facing transformative changes in climate and labor and needs innovation to thrive in the 21st century. Investing in farmworkers to steward land of their own can create a better life for those whose labor feeds the world and a healthier community for all of us.



MICOP, CAUSE, and Líderes Campesinas partnered from 2022-2024 to explore the opportunities and challenges of developing farmworker cooperatives and land trusts in Ventura County.



Research Methods

- Surveys
- Focus groups
- Interviews
- GIS mapping
- Academic literature review

Farmworker leader advisory committee known as MILPA made final decisions on policy recommendations.



Surveys with Farmworkers

- 73 Ventura County farmworkers were interviewed (Spring 2023)
- 56% women
- Average 42 years old
- Average 18 years working in agriculture
- 48% spoke an indigenous language
- 77% said they like working in agriculture
- 82% said they plan to continue working in agriculture 5 years from now



“

*I do not know any
other type of work*

”

A word cloud featuring the word "SPANISH" in large, dark green, bold letters, slanted upwards from left to right. Other languages are scattered around it: "ENGLISH" in green, "ZAPOTECO" in yellow, "NAHUATL" in dark green, "PUREPECHA" in light blue, and "MIXTECO" in brown. All words are slanted in various directions, following the general upward trend of the "SPANISH" word.

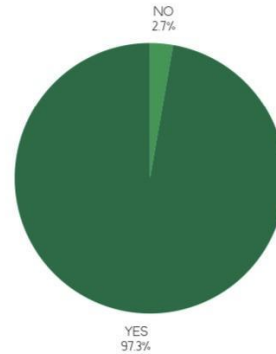
Language Proficiency:

Spanish was the most spoken language reported among the participants. However, large numbers of farmworkers surveyed spoke indigenous languages such as Mixteco and Zapoteco, and some spoke English.

Interest in Cooperative Farming



- 99% interested in owning their own farm
- 97% interested in managing farmland owned by an organization
- 93% interested in being part of a worker cooperative



Would you be interested in managing a farm on land owned by a community organization or other agency?

Barriers to farm ownership

Largest barriers reported to managing their own farm:

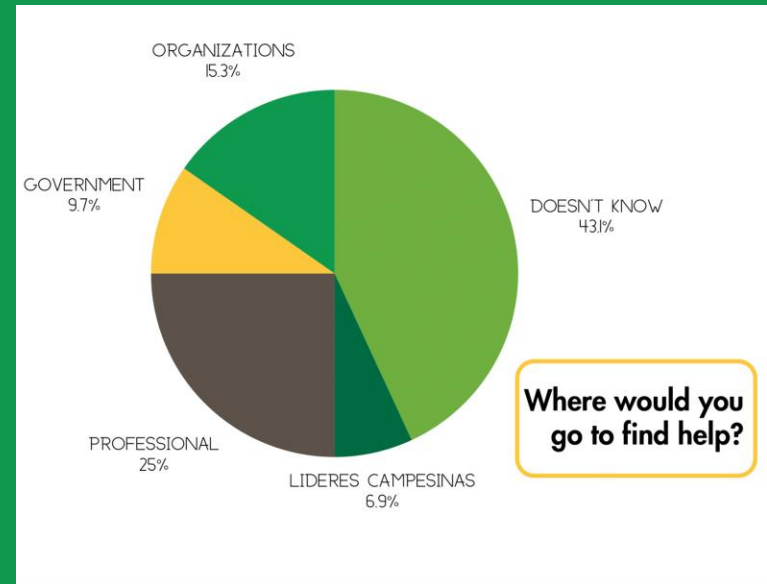
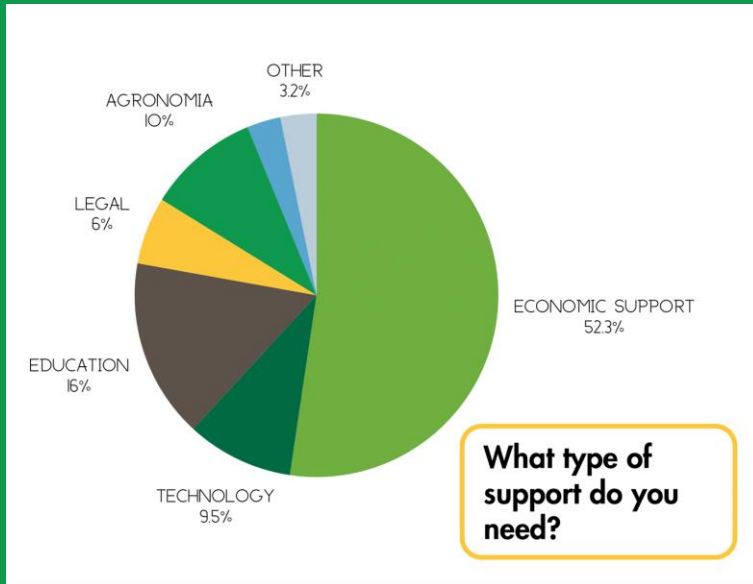
- Land access
- Immigration status
- Access to credit



Support Needed

54% said financial/economic support was the biggest need

43% said they did not know when asked where they would seek support



Focus Groups with Farmworkers

- 2 focus groups
 - 10 participants in each group
 - One in Spanish and one Mixteco
- Farmworkers desired more autonomy over their work, a greater share of economic benefits, and healthier working environments
- Opinions on the exact cooperative structure were divided. While some supported the idea of a full farmworker cooperative, others favored some functions shared by a cooperative while families manage their own plots of land individually

Barriers to becoming farm operators:

- Access to capital and financial institutions
- Limited technology literacy
- Language proficiency
- Incomplete immigration status



Interviews with Alternative Agriculture Practitioners

In 2023, we interviewed 15 experts in alternative models of agriculture, including representatives of land trusts, cooperatives, farm incubators, small farm owners, advocacy and technical support groups. Some common themes emerged:



Importance of secure land access and tenure:

- Land access is biggest barrier to alternative farming approaches.
- Scale is critical to economic success and competing with large corporate investors for land.
- Long-term leases allow sustainable farming to reap benefits such as improved soil health.
- Land costs can be reduced through easements, land donations or other partnerships with environmental conservation organizations/agencies.

Interviews with Alternative Agriculture Practitioners

Balancing vision with practicality:

Difficult tradeoffs between hard economic realities and aspirational vision for sustainable environmental practices, fair pay for those working the land, and serving the surrounding community.

Maximizing economic benefits through on-site housing, event space, educational programming, etc.

Moving up value chain or selling direct to consumers.

Diversity of organizational structures:

Cooperatives, 501c3, 501c2, for-profit businesses, and incubators

Which functions of a farm are shared vs individually managed?

Need for technical assistance, financing, and permitting structures that support different types of organizations



Interviews with Alternative Agriculture Practitioners

Tapping into skills and resources:

Successful organizations required a mix of sometimes contradictory skill sets in practical farming, business administration, and community programming.

English language proficiency and immigration status is a barrier to some of the highest value markets and also to applying for federal grants.

Changing policy and systems:

Small-scale farming in a global commodity market can feel like an impossible challenge.

Policy change is necessary to increase the viability of innovations and alternative models of farming

More loan and grant programs, reducing barriers to existing programs, supporting permitting

Opportunities: Agricultural Land Equity Taskforce and Sustainable Agricultural Lands Conservation (SALC) program.



Academic Literature Review

International case studies of agricultural cooperatives

- South Africa
- Brazil
- Bangladesh

Agricultural cooperatives' legacy in the Central Coast

- Agricultural cooperatives were vital to the early development of Ventura County's most profitable agricultural industries such as citrus and strawberries.



Academic Literature Review

Takeaways:

Structuring cooperatives to avoid common problems based in economic theory, such as internal conflict due to different levels of effort of members, conflicts between short-term vs long-term strategies, or conflicts over diversifying operations to manage risk

Opportunities for partnerships with conservation organizations such as land trusts and using easement structures to reduce land costs in exchange for achieving environmental standards and goals



Analysis of Farm Ownership in Ventura

We mapped farmland ownership in Ventura County.

The largest owners of farmland in Ventura County are overwhelmingly LLCs.

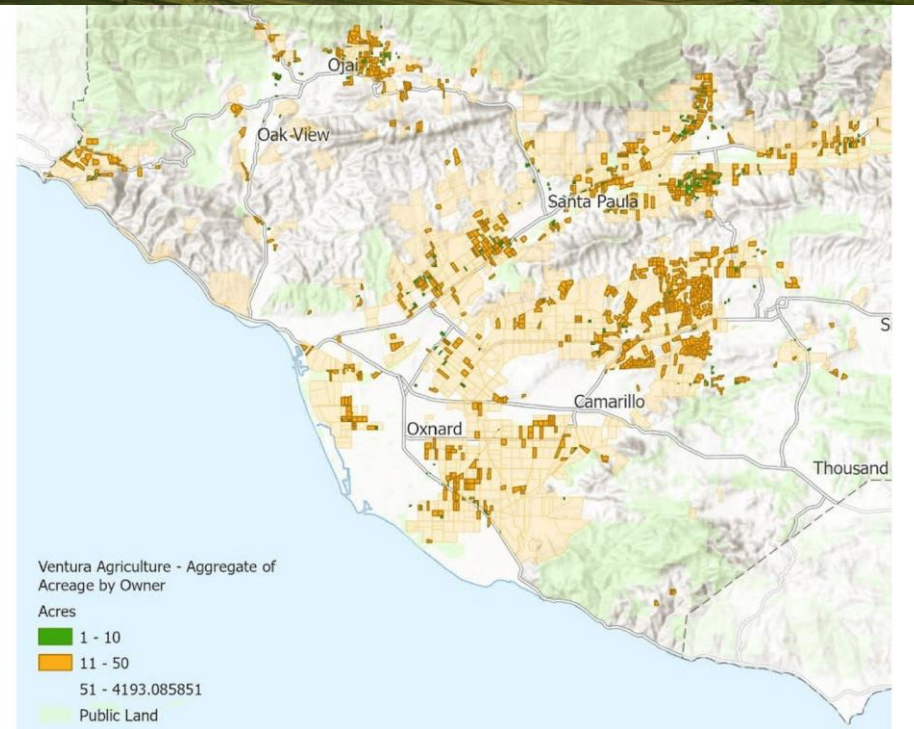
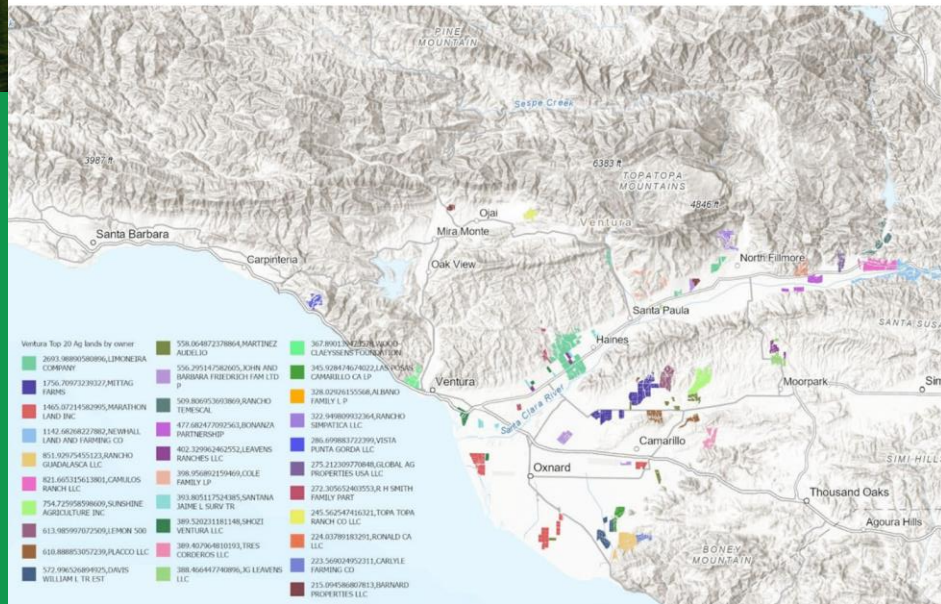
Mostly large parcels over 50 acres, especially in the Oxnard Plain. Too expensive for beginning farmers, farmers of color, and current farmworkers if they're not part of a cooperative or land trust with access to institutional capital. Smaller parcels that may be more accessible in Santa Clara Valley and Somis areas.

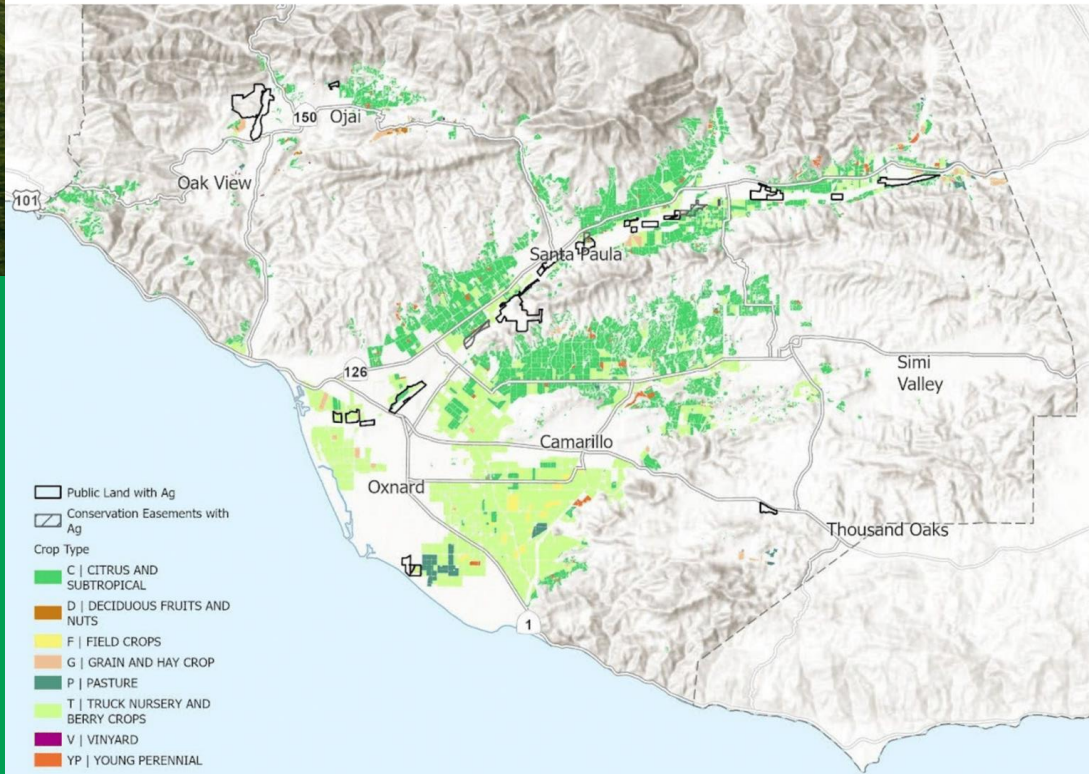
Public or non-profit conservation organizations such as The Nature Conservancy own significant farmland around public green space restoration priorities such as the Ormond Beach Wetlands and the Santa Clara River. Could this provide potential land access for farmworker cooperatives?

Regenerative agriculture can reduce pesticide and fertilizer runoff and improve quality of green space.



TOP 20 LARGEST OWNERS OF FARMLAND IN VENTURA COUNTY





Policy Recommendations: **Top Priority Policies**

First Opportunity to Purchase Ordinance: When farmland is sold within the local jurisdiction, the seller could be required to first offer it to existing workers on the farm as well as employee-owned cooperatives, land trusts, and conservation organizations.

Succession Planning for Farmers: the county to provide assistance with succession planning for small farmers nearing retirement, and encourage sale or donation to small and beginning farmers, farmers of color, former farmworkers, and cooperatives, conservancies and land trusts.

Support with Permitting for Cooperatives: Local or state governments could provide staff to assist with permitting processes or develop streamlined processes for farmworkers seeking to start their own cooperative farm.



Policy Recommendations: Second-Tier Priority Policies

Funding to Transition to Organic: Local, state, or federal funds could support small and beginning farmers transition from traditional to organic farming as an incentive to convert environmentally damaging farming practices to more beneficial ones.

Requiring Farmland Preservation in New Development: Large-scale conversions of farmland could be required by permitting agencies or community benefits agreements to set aside a percentage of land to remain in agriculture and be used for socially beneficial purposes such as being donated to a land trust, conservancy, community garden, or farmworker cooperative.

Department of Agricultural Equity: Local, state, or federal government would provide dedicated staffing to advance social, economic, and environmental justice for farmworkers, small and diverse farmers, and agricultural communities.



Conclusion

The future of agriculture of Ventura County requires change and experimentation. Traditional conservation movements are seeking a greater focus on racial and economic equity. Farmworker leaders are envisioning new forms of farming where they can have greater autonomy and dignity, healthier work in harmony with the land, and enjoy more of the fruits of their labor. These intersections create possibilities to not just advance a better economic future for farmworkers, but preserve agricultural land and green space access for our communities.

