



BARRIERS, CHALLENGES AND LIMITATIONS THAT HISPANIC AND LATINO FARMERS AND RANCHERS FACE TO START, DEVELOP AND SUSTAIN FARMING AND RANCHING BUSINESSES IN THE STATE OF NEBRASKA

HISPANIC AND LATINO FARMER AND RANCHER OUTREACH PROJECT

Preliminary Report

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Introduction

The primary purpose of this project is to reach out to Hispanic and Latino farmers and ranchers in both states and learn about the barriers, challenges and limitations they face to start, develop and sustain their farming and ranching operations. The project also explores farmers' and ranchers' relationships with the USDA, with particular emphasis on access to programs.

This document is intended to be a tool for the future analysis of the data as well as evidence of the work done between January and May of 2011. The first section of this document includes a brief history of Hispanic and Latino farmers and ranchers in Nebraska and an outline of USDA programs. It also describes the framework used for the data collection and an overview of the data collected during the spring of 2011 in the state of Nebraska.

The last section of the document contains a discussion on the possible barriers, challenges and limitations that Hispanic and Latino farmers and ranchers in Nebraska face to start and/or run their operations. This approach is based on empirical reference to the information collected and the collector's (interviewer's) personal views and judgment. Therefore, this document should not be used as a scientific study.

Background

Hispanic and Latino Farmers and Ranchers in Nebraska

Despite the booming increase of Hispanics and Latinos in the state over the last decade, a strange phenomenon occurred between 2002 and 2007: A significant number of farmers and ranchers with Hispanic and Latino origins fled the agricultural sector of Nebraska. For a detailed analysis of current demographics and trends related to Hispanic and Latino farmers and ranchers see the first Center for Rural Affairs (CFRA) report in this series *A Snapshot of Missouri and Nebraska Latino Farmers and Ranchers*.

These numbers could be a reflection of the overall trends happening all across rural America. There has been a general decrease of the numbers of farm and ranch operators, while the remaining ones keep expanding in size, in both capital and land. In addition, farm and ranch operators have become something of a scarcity. The average age of Hispanic and Latino operators in 2007 was nearly 57 years, which means that a large fraction of them are either retiring or retired, or will be in the near future. These are some of the factors that could be contributing to the endangerment of these farmers and ranchers.

The question we should be asking is: Why has Nebraska been unable to integrate this new generation of Hispanics and Latinos who have been migrating and settling in the state since the 1980's into the agricultural sector as stakeholders?

Still, the trend is not different in other Midwestern states. Nebraska is not the only state with negative balances in the number of these farmers. According to the 2002 and 2007 USDA Census of Agriculture, Wyoming, South Dakota and Missouri saw important losses too. Colorado and Iowa kept steady numbers. Kansas was the only state in the region that experienced an increase in Hispanic and Latinos operators over the same timeframe with 13 percent.

The 2008 Farm Bill and Historically Underserved Groups

In legislation, farmers and ranchers are usually referred to as “agricultural producers” or just as “producers.” As defined by the 2008 Farm Bill, these terms identify an owner, operator, landlord, tenant, or sharecropper who shares in the risk of producing a crop and is entitled to share in the crop available for marketing, or would have shared had the crop been produced.

The term “Socially Disadvantaged Farmer or Rancher” (SDA), also defined by this same piece of legislation, refers to a producer who is a member of a group “whose members have been subjected to racial or ethnic prejudice because of their identity as members of a group without regard to their individual qualities.” The definition often includes members of a group subject to gender prejudice. SDA groups are women, African Americans, American Indians, Alaskan Natives, Hispanics, Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders.

Another group considered in the 2008 Farm Bill is beginning farmers and ranchers (BFR). This group includes individuals or entities (cooperatives, corporations and other entities) that have not operated a farm or ranch or have operated a farm or ranch for not more than 10 years. To qualify, all members of the entity must be related by blood or marriage and all must be beginning farmers or ranchers. Definitions currently used by USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service and Farm Service Agency add the requirement that the individual or entity (including all its members) must substantially participate in day-to-day operations of the farm or ranch.

The 2008 farm bill offers an improved set of regulations intended to ensure that services are available to these historically underserved groups. These services are provided through programs offered by three operating agencies in Nebraska: Farm Service Agency (FSA), Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS) and Rural Development (RD). It is important to note that the programs are available to any producer, regardless of ethnicity, race, gender, social status, or other prejudices. However, support for applicants who qualify as SDA or BFR comes from separate pools of funds, which makes it easier and faster to obtain.

USDA Programs Directed to Farmers and Ranchers

USDA offers a broad array of programs directed to farmer and ranchers, through its main agencies in Nebraska: Farm Service Agency, Natural Resources Conservation Service and Rural Development. These programs are designed to address different types of problems that affect farmers and ranchers and their farms and ranches environmentally, economically and socially.

Farm Service Agency

This agency is mostly known for the administration and management of the farm subsidy program stipulated in the farm bill and approved by Congress every five years. However, the FSA also offers a series of programs designed to support and develop struggling farm and ranch operators including those who are beginners and socially disadvantaged. This is intended to be accomplished by providing credit opportunities to those producers who haven't been able to obtain it successfully through commercial lenders.

The support is provided to eligible producers in the form of direct loans (FSA provides all the funding) or guaranteed loans (FSA guarantees the loan and a commercial lender provides the funding). Farm Ownership loans could be allocated towards the purchase of farmland,

construction or repair of buildings and other fixtures, developing farmland to promote soil and water conservation, or to refinance debt.

Operating loans may be used to purchase livestock, farm equipment, feed, seed, fuel, farm chemicals, insurance and other operating expenses and also be used to pay for minor improvements to buildings, costs associated with land and water development, family living expenses and to refinance debts under certain conditions. Other services FSA provides include programs directed to natural disaster relief (ERP), conservation of farmland (CRP) and farm insurance, among others. All programs are directed to agricultural producers of food and fiber. Please go to http://www.fsa.usda.gov/Internet/FSA_File/allfsa09.pdf to learn more about the programs.

Natural Resources Conservation Service

This agency offers programs that help farmers and ranchers be better stewards of the land. The programs are aimed to reduce soil erosion, enhance water supplies, improve water quality, increase wildlife habitat, and reduce damages caused by floods and other natural disasters. In addition, the latest 2008 Farm Bill introduced the Organic Initiative, which offers already-certified organic producers assistance for applying new conservation practices to treat natural resource concerns, and offers participants transitioning to organic agriculture assistance to protect natural resources while meeting their organic certification goals. Please visit <http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/programs/> to learn more about the programs.

Rural Development

This agency is an advocate for the development and well-being of the Americans living and working in rural communities. Rural Development offers programs that may suit farmers and ranchers, including housing and business development programs. The housing programs are directed to provide homeownership opportunities to low- and moderate-income rural Americans through several loan, grant and loan guarantee programs. The programs also make funding available to individuals to finance vital improvements necessary to make their homes decent, safe and sanitary.

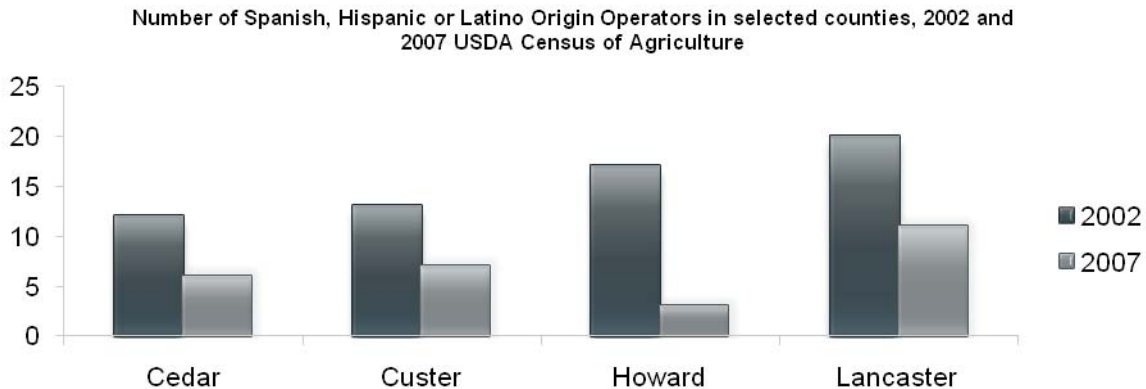
Business development programs work in partnership with the private sector and community-based organizations to provide financial assistance and business planning. These programs also help fund projects that create or preserve quality jobs and/or promote a clean rural environment. Recipients of these programs may include individuals, corporations, partnerships, cooperatives, public bodies, nonprofit corporations, Indian tribes and private companies. To learn about these and other programs offered by Rural Development, please visit <http://www.rurdev.usda.gov/ProgramsAndOpportunities.html>.

Framework

This section includes a detailed description of the methodology of work for the outreach and data collection.

Geographical Area Covered

At the beginning of the project, the area to cover was determined to be Lincoln and Scotts Bluff counties. These are the counties where historically most Hispanic families have settled to own and operate farms and ranches. Scotts Bluff County in particular is the county in the state with highest numbers of Latino producers, even when they declined between 2002 and 2007. Lincoln County, on the other hand, was the only county that saw an increase over the same period of time. Other counties that recorded important shifting of numbers were: Cedar, Custer, Howard, and Lancaster counties.



However, while exploring the data, the history and previous efforts that have been done in the state, we encounter a broader scenario. Even when the Agricultural Census data pointed at places in western Nebraska as obvious targets for this endeavor, we couldn't ignore that other communities in the state were seeing interesting changes. For example, Lancaster County lost 45 percent of its Latino producers in five years, while Howard County lost 82 percent, the largest loss in the state.

Other interesting communities such as Lexington and Madison, in Dawson and Madison counties respectively, saw important increases of the overall population of Latinos, as discussed earlier. There is a big chance that some of these people are in the process of acquiring land and beginning farming and/or ranching operations. Thus, we needed to expand the effort to communities across the state so we could get a better understanding of the phenomenon occurring in Nebraska.

Networking and Locating Hispanic and Latino Farmers and Ranchers

The process to locate and contact the producers was different for each community. For instance, the town of Lexington in Dawson County is a strong Latino community where friendship, cooperation and family relations prevail among the Latino producers. There and in the similar town of Madison in Madison County, we have been able to break into the community successfully, gaining trust, building relationships and sharing information among the members of the community. We also identified at least one leader in each of these communities who could serve as a promoter of the programs in the communities and serve as a bridge with local service providers in the future. These individuals have been put in contact with the local USDA agency personnel, with the purpose of building working relationships that will aid the process of outreach to Latino producers

in the community.

In other regions where Latino producers are further apart from each other, these kinds of communities are scarce or nonexistent. As a result, the approach to locate and contact farmers was made on an individual basis. Contact information usually came from rural directories, state producer databases and farm subsidies database. This work included lots of phone calls, browsing websites and social media, analyzing databases and networking with people in the field. We also received assistance from local organizations, such as Community Crops in Lincoln, Neb. cooperatives and local farmers, to get a feel for where to look. In addition, we attended events including the Nebraska Sustainable Agriculture Society 2011 Healthy Farm & Rural Advantage Conference in February. These events were helpful for meeting producers and agricultural leaders across the state, acquiring networking tools to help locate Latino producers across the state.



Farmers and other members of the community attended the outreach meetings to learn more about the services that USDA provides to rural people. (Photo by Rafael Martinez-Feria)

Collecting Data: Learning from the Producers and the Agents



The interviews were face to face and, in many cases, at the farm or ranch. (Photo by Rachel Albin)

Once the producer was successfully contacted and expressed interest in participating as a subject of this research, they were visited and interviewed by the data collector. As this study sought to collect a large amount of data to understand the issues that affect access to resources designed to assist farmers and ranchers, a survey instrument was needed to obtain such information. The questions asked during the interviews were prepared by CFRA and its partners and reviewed by the Campus Institutional Review Board of the University of Missouri.

Interviews were tape-recorded. This helped the interviewer to focus on the dynamics of the interview and not on writing notes. The recordings will be transcribed into text and, if needed, translated into English. The interviews usually took no more than an hour. If it exceeded this time, the producer was asked if he wanted to continue or to reschedule the interview. The producer could be contacted at a later time for a follow-up interview. If possible, the interviewer took photographic record of the visit of the operation. This will help the analyzers gain further understanding of the type and size of the operations.

Participation in this research was voluntary. The producer could withdraw from the research at any time without penalty. They did not have to answer any questions they did not want to. The

information they provided will remain confidential. Nobody except for the researchers of this project will have access to it. The name and identity of the producer will not be disclosed at any time.

All of this information was stated in the document: “Oral Consent to Participate as a Subject of Research ‘Improving the Use of USDA Programs among Hispanic and Latino Farmers and Ranchers.’ ” This document was shared with the producer before the interview took place. If the producer had a concern or question regarding the programs and services that USDA offers through FSA, NRCS and RD agencies, the interviewer would take extra time at the end of the interview to explain – in general terms – the broad range of programs, and how they could find more information.



The outreach project also included putting the producer in contact with organizations that provide technical assistance.
(Photo by Rafael Martinez-Feria)

When a fair number of producers were interviewed in a specific region, then the data collector proceeded to interview the local FSA, NRCS and RD county or area offices. This interview involved the people that have the most experience in providing services to Hispanics and Latinos. If no agents had substantial experience, then those most engaged in outreach, lending programs and/or businesses development programs were interviewed. Sometimes, the interviews were held between the interviewer and several agents, and other times as an individual interview. The data collection process is the same as the one described for the producer.

Data collected during the spring of 2011 in Nebraska will be analyzed and interpreted by a team of researchers conformed by staff from the CFRA and its partners, organized by Dr. Stephen Jeanetta, Assistant Professor of the Rural Sociology Department for University of Missouri Extension. For any questions regarding data analysis, please contact Dr. Jeanetta at JeanettaS@missouri.edu.

Field Notes

Twenty producers in nine counties were located as a result of this effort. Seventeen of these producers were successfully contacted and interviewed in eight counties including: Clay, Custer, Dawson, Hall, Lancaster, Lincoln, Madison and Scotts Bluff. As stated above, the information collected focused on the way each producer operates the farm or ranch, emphasizing the kind of relationship they have with organizations that provide services directed toward the improvement of their operations. The following section describes the author’s perspective on problems addressed by this project. This method relies on the author’s judgment and experience gained by performing the data collection.

An Approach to the Interviewed Hispanic and Latino Producers

As discussed in the first part of this report, throughout the course of history, just a small fraction of

all Hispanics and Latinos have transitioned into owning and operating farms and ranches. During the 20th century they competed with other immigrant groups such as the Germans from Russia as field workers and later for farmland and markets. Just a few decided to stay to farm and ranch along the Platte River valley. It appears that a large portion of those early immigrants returned to their native southwestern states – mostly Texas – and Mexico. Today the operations run by Hispanics and Latino producers make up around 0.5 percent of farms and ranches in the state even when the population of Hispanics and Latinos statewide is higher than ever before (9.2 percent). (USDA Census of Agriculture, 2007; US Census, 2010)

It is difficult to study the Hispanic and Latino producers in Nebraska as a whole group due to the diverse origin of its members. Few of the producers are the descendants of those first immigrants from Mexico and the American Southwest who transitioned into farming and ranching. Others are Hispanics and Latinos who came from urban areas or other states with the intention of starting small farms. A bigger number of the producers interviewed were immigrants native to foreign countries such as Mexico, Guatemala and El Salvador. They tend to concentrate in areas where employment opportunities are available.

It appears that most of the producers who first worked or are still working as laborers first migrated from Mexico and Central America to states like California, Texas, Oregon and Washington, before establishing themselves in Nebraska. During these years they might have worked in agriculture-related jobs as farm laborers or in other positions. Through these jobs they gained experience complementary to that they had from their native countries. Although some of them might have originally come to the country undocumented, all of the farmers interviewed are either legal residents or citizens of the United States.

The producers we interviewed decided to settle and farm and/or ranch in rural Nebraska for a number of different reasons. Most of them were drawn to the state as labor force for sugar beet production and later for the meatpacking industry and decided to farm or ranch on the side, but never as a primary source of their income. Some others saw an opportunity to leave their wage jobs and transition into full-time farmers or ranchers. Making this decision depended largely on the amount opportunities, resources and relationships that they first had. However, it is clear that all the farmers who were interviewed share a passion for farming and ranching activities, and consider it to be what they enjoy doing the most.

Some of the interviewed producers could be described as middle-age (35 to 55 years old), while most of them would fall in to the category of seniors (55+ years old), with a couple of exceptions where the producers are less than 35 years old. Most of them have families, with children who are teenagers and young adults usually going to high school, vocational schools, college, or working outside home. It is rare when one of the children works at the family farm. Also, none of the producers were farming or ranching with siblings or other relatives. In only one case a producer farmed with his brother for 3 years, and then his brother decided to work somewhere else.

Some farmers maintain good relationships with their relatives and neighbors. For instance, the town of Lexington, as discussed above, has a strong community where farmers usually are connected by family links and friendships. It is not uncommon for these producers to gather to ride horses and for other social events. Sometimes they also discuss their farms and even help each other with small tasks. In other cases, the interviewed producers lived apart from other

Hispanic and Latino producers. Thus, communities or even relationships with other Latinos do not happen.

Most of these producers learned farming and/or ranching skills while being raised on a farm. This knowledge was passed on to them through family and cultural heritage. In the case of the small farmers, few of them hold a higher education degree and know little more than traditional methods of growing crops and raising livestock. The use of educational programs provided by organizations such as Extension is not common among small producers. Most of their training comes from personal experience and learning from other producers and/or the veterinarian.

On the other hand, larger Hispanic and Latino producers make more extended use of training programs usually provided by Extension, farmers co-ops and other organizations. Other skills also vary among these Hispanic and Latino producers. For instance, the use of Spanish as first language is widespread among the producers who are recent immigrants. Some of them have limited or no knowledge of written and spoken English. Producers who were born in the U.S. speak English fluently, and in some cases also some Spanish.

The type and size of the farms and ranches operated by the interviewed producers vary largely depending on their situation. Producers with full-time jobs outside the farm or ranch usually have limited land and capital. They raise small numbers of sheep, cattle and horses. A few grow specialty crops and other produce that they sell to selective outlets such as farmers markets



Small Hispanic and Latino producers raise crops, livestock and poultry that fit better the size of their operations.
(Photo by Rafael Martienez-Feria)

or the local community. In most cases these small producers market their products at local sale barns. Also, these producers usually have little financial education and undeveloped relationships with banks and other investors and struggle to acquire financing resources to buy tools, machinery, land and inputs. It is rare to find among these small producers one with experience of accessing the programs of the USDA. On the other hand, larger producers, usually full-time farmers, run several hundreds of acres under production of commodity crops such as corn, beans, alfalfa, hay and sugar beets, and cattle. They have good relationships with lenders and can acquire credit and other financial services to buy inputs, land and equipment relatively easily. These farmers are more likely to have some experience accessing USDA programs, which in most of the cases is through the Farm Service Agency.

Limitations and Barriers to Run the Farm or Ranch

Most of the interviewed producers face barriers and limitations that threaten their ability to sustain their farms and ranches. These challenges are related to economic and social factors, while some also face environmental issues. Based on the approach discussed above, the following factors can be considered to study how these barriers and limitations affect the

Hispanic and Latino producer's ability to begin, develop and sustain farms and ranches.

Limited access to land: The high prices of land, especially in more recent years, have made the process of renting and buying land more difficult. They have to compete with other producers for the land available, which often goes to those who can pay more for it. It is not uncommon that landowners are particular about to whom they lease or sell their land, and in most cases they prefer people that they already know. For a small or beginner producer who has little or no connections with landowners, this can become a serious limitation. Moreover, the high prices of land raise their own property taxes, putting more pressure on the operation.

Limited economic resilience: It seems that most of the operations visited are smaller in terms of land and capital, than average and more vulnerable to changes in the cost of inputs and prices of their products. Although there are some exceptions, most have not been able to develop alternative strategies to market their products such as direct marketing (farmers markets, community supported agriculture, niche markets, etc), or add value to their produce. There are a couple of cases that the only alternative for them to be able to survive is to sell portions of their land. "This is what we have to do to pay the bills," a rancher said.

Limited access to machinery and equipment: Some of the producers expressed that they have a difficult time renting machinery and equipment or contracting someone to do cultivation, planting and harvesting labors for them. Since the land they own is small, it is difficult to justify buying equipment for their own use. But accessing rentals or contractors is not easy. Most of the times these contractors are busy doing jobs for larger operations and would not take the orders of the smaller ones, or if they do, would do it later in the season when planting dates are already passed.

Limited financial literacy: Hispanic and Latino producers also face challenges to access financial resources that could help them start, develop and sustain their farm or ranch. This is especially true for those small producers that have little or no financial literacy. Those who are new comers might be unfamiliar with the credit systems available, or if they are familiar, they might not have a complete understanding of how they work. During one of our outreach meetings we devoted some of our presentation to explain concepts such as credit score, interest rate and mortgages to the attendees when they started asking questions about how to apply for commercial credit.

Limited education: Of the interviewed producers, more than 60 percent were raised in a foreign country. These farmers and ranchers received the education that was available for them in the rural areas of those countries. Some of them might have attended elementary school and less likely high school. None of them have a college degree. Their knowledge and skills are based on their own experience. Moreover, their limited knowledge of written and spoken English and use of information technology are barriers that they face to access technical information that could help them implement practices to develop and improve their operations.

Limitations and Barriers to Access USDA Programs

There are also limitations and barriers that Hispanic and Latino producers face to be able to access USDA programs. These limitations are related to those challenges that they face to run their operations. The following factors can be considered to study how these barriers and

limitations affect how the Hispanic and Latino producers access and apply to USDA programs.

Lack of knowledge and understanding of the programs: Just a few of the interviewed producers were aware that programs of the USDA even existed. Most of the time they have no way of getting information about the programs that USDA agencies and other organizations offer. Usually they are not in the agencies' mailing lists and do not receive information by mail or other means.

Some producers with knowledge of some of the programs said that they learned about them through other farmers. However the information they get from other farmers is usually very limited and gets summed up as "Go to the FSA office, they can help you." Those producers that have received information through mail or email said that the information available online is "incomplete" and "difficult to understand" and usually just refer them to the county agents for further information.

Producers who have received information about the programs by mail, but cannot speak or read English, reported they have not tried to read the information or learn more about the programs. To step into a county office without a clear idea of what they are looking for could be a significant barrier to get relevant information about what programs can suit them. For instance, a socially disadvantaged farmer from central Nebraska agreed that, since she and her family raise wool sheep (a non-traditional livestock in the state) the agents don't know exactly what programs USDA could offer to them. "They just say 'There is nothing for you,' and after a while you give up..." she said.

No financial records or business plans: Some of the producers reported that if they would apply for a USDA program, such as an FSA operating loan, they feel they would not have all the information that the USDA requires to apply to the programs. Some of the producers who farm part-time have not been able to develop a business plan or keep appropriate records of the cash flows of the operation. This would make it very difficult to come up with a financial statement or predictions of cash flows needed to apply to several of the programs. This could be partially because they have no knowledge of how to develop a business plan or keep appropriate financial records, and partially because they do not feel they need them to run an operation.

Misconceptions of the programs: Also some of the small producers said they think the programs are made for just large operations. The size of the operation, in land and capital, could play a significant role on the producers' perception of the availability of the programs. "Based on what I've heard, I thought you had to be an experienced producer to be able to apply to a government program," a vegetable farmer in southeastern Nebraska said. These misconceptions could create strong barriers in the producer's mind, to even seek information about the programs. Sometimes, these false impressions are reinforced when the county agents don't fully understand what kind of programs the producers could apply to. "Sometimes, when you go in, you don't even know what you are asking," a small-scale alfalfa farmer in western Nebraska said. "In my experience you have to ask directly [to the agent] what [program] you are looking for, otherwise they don't know what's available for you."

Conclusions

It appears that most of the Hispanic and Latino farmers and ranchers face barriers, challenges and limitations to run and develop their farms and ranches and access the programs available to

them. Based on the experience gained through this effort and the analysis of the data collected in both states, we will be able to determine which are the most important barriers, challenges and limitations that Hispanic and Latino producers face to begin, develop and sustain their farming and ranching operations in Nebraska and Missouri. With this, the Center for Rural Affairs and its partners will formulate recommendations and develop strategies to help these producers overcome these barriers.

THIS SERIES

This is the second in a series of reports on Latino farmers and ranchers in Missouri and Nebraska. Future reports will summarize interviews with Latino farmers and ranchers in both states, and, using the data in this report and interviews with farmers, ranchers and others, outline implications for USDA, its programs and how they relate to Latino farmers and ranchers. Partners in the project include the Center for Rural Affairs, the Latino Research Initiative of the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, the Cambio Center at the University of Missouri-Columbia, and the Alianzas Program of the University of Missouri-Kansas City.

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ABOUT THE CENTER FOR RURAL AFFAIRS

This is a publication of the Rural Research and Analysis Program of the Center for Rural Affairs. Established in 1973, the Center for Rural Affairs is a private, nonprofit organization with a mission to establish strong rural communities, social and economic justice, environmental stewardship, and genuine opportunity for all while engaging people in decisions that affect the quality of their lives and the future of their communities.

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