

# YOU ARE WHAT YOU USED TO PRODUCE IN THE PAST: CAN AGRICULTURE SUSTAIN HMONG FAMILIES IN ST. PAUL?

Environmental Studies 395

By: Mai Pa Kou Yang Advisors: Jean Lavigne and Diane Veale-Jones

## Abstract:

Minnesota has the second largest Hmong population in the United States and many of them are farmers. Increasingly, these farmers are encountering barriers that affect their access to land and their ability to keep farming. Agriculture is a key factor in the Hmong community and is important to sustaining Hmong's cultural identity. My research question is about whether this way of life can continue. To proceed with my research, I began by conducting by reviewing the literature and other similar research papers about Hmong farmers. I also interviewed multiple Hmong farmers and USDA staff. After conducting my research, I have come to the conclusion that agriculture is not an industry that can support Hmong farmers.

## Who are the Hmong?:

The Hmong, are an Asian ethnic group that is said to have originated from China. They are known for being an independent ethnic group that resides in the mountains. Living in the mountains, they provided for themselves through agriculture. Agriculture is a practice that they carried with them throughout their migration as a way to sustain themselves. After settling in the United States, Hmong who farm in St. Paul use farming as a way to preserve their cultural identity. The Hmong's identities rely on within what they carried with them throughout their migration from war; agriculture was what they carried with them for so long. When farming on the fields, in Minnesota, today the practice that are performed are those that ancestors have passed down to them. If they lose their farming practices, the identity of Hmong will also fade. History that is written in books will not be as meaningful as if it is being carried out.

### Loans

- Hmong farmers have no established credit
- Application forms are in English, which makes it hard for non-English speakers to understand
- Application has a lot of paper to fill out
- Hmong's mistrust toward government because of historical issues

### Accessing Land

- Land is used for corn production to produce ethanol
- Farmers have to travel further to find farm land, which can restrict them from selling at farmers markets

### Barriers to farming

### Language

- Farmers know little or no English
- Youth are achieving higher education and moving away from the agriculture industry
- Youth are losing their mother tongue, making it hard to be translators and help their parents

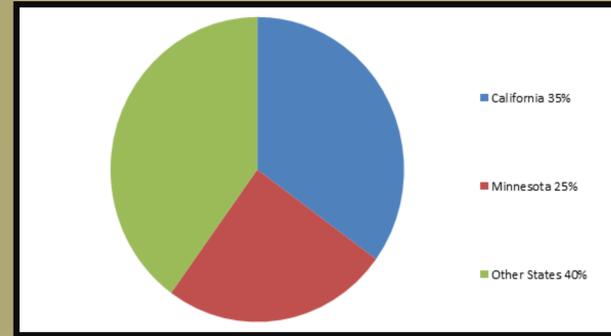


<http://eauclairtothailand.blogspot.com/>  
This picture shows the farming practices that Hmong in Thailand used. They farmed on steep slopes, using a bamboo stick to make a hole on the soil. The men made the holes and the women put in the seeds. The soil has an ashy appearance.



<http://m.minneapolisfed.org/article.cfm?id=2448>  
This picture shows a woman, living in the U.S., using a plowing machine to help her get the soil ready for seedling. The slope here is flat and she used more advanced tools.

Graph 1: The Hmong in the United States



This pie chart show the percentage of where Hmong reside in the United States. A big percentage lives in California and the second largest percentage lives in Minnesota, while the rest are scattered around in the U.S.

Table 1: Samples of 20 Hmong Farmers

Farmers	Age	English (N/Y)	Income
1	60	No	\$5000
2	51	No	\$4000
3	74	No	\$5500
4	53	No	\$4800
5	54	No	\$6000
6	50	No	\$5400
7	59	No	\$5000
8	56	No	\$5000
9	54	No	\$3500
10	56	No	\$3200
11	53	No	\$4000
12	62	No	\$3500
13	35	No	\$4500
14	80	No	\$3200
15	65	No	\$3400
16	70	No	\$4500
17	65	No	\$4200
18	45	No	\$4500
19	46	No	\$2200
20	67	No	\$4500

The average age of farmers that were interviewed was 58 years old. None of them speak English, and they only make an average income of \$4,500 through farming. Once again, this table shows that language is a factor that farmers struggle with as it is listed on the graph above.

## Research Methods:

I began conducting my research by reading articles about Hmong farming, then dove into reading other college students' theses about Hmong farmers. I then read journal articles about farming among Hmong farmers. These different types of articles that I read gave me broad barriers or conflicts among Hmong farmers. Using what I pulled out from the articles, I then formed interview questions to ask Hmong farmers that I interviewed in St. Paul. This was done to see if any of the barriers that I had come across in the articles applied to the farmers. After interviewing Hmong farmers, I went on to research about some possible solutions to the problems that Hmong farmers are encountering. After finding some solutions, I formed some questions to ask a USDA farm loan manager about their loans that can help benefit farmers.

## Conclusion:

After conducting my research under careful consideration, I conclude that agriculture is a fading industry for the Hmong people. The majority of the farmers are elders whose average age is 58. Many of the interviewed farmers also voiced that agriculture today is just a hobby that they do as a reminder of who they are and how their ancestors once lived self-sufficiently. English is a lacking factor among the elders, therefore, accessing agriculture resources is difficult. Youth are also losing interest and have different career goals that they want to pursue. Young adults' different vision for their future was what made me concluded that agriculture is not a sustainable industry for the Hmong because they are the next generation that will carry on the Hmong cultural identity. Land is becoming harder to obtain and will be much harder if there are no translators to help farmers negotiate with land owners for renting land. Since Hmong are an internally focused community, finding help from outside sources will be harder because they will go to their relatives before reaching out to agriculture assisting programs, like the University of Minnesota Extension farming program.