

Research Brief: San Diego County New and Young Farmers Needs Assessment

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Analysis/ writing by: Colin Cureton, CHIP Food Systems Director, SDFSFA Voting/ Reducing Barriers to Farming Working Group Member

Formatting/ final edits by: Elly Brown, Director, San Diego Food System Alliance

Introduction

San Diego County (SDC) has more small farms than any other county in the country, over 400 organic farms, and has the 12th largest farm economy of any U.S. County, producing over \$5 billion annually (*1). Despite being a national leader in agriculture, a number of challenges including high land prices, continued development pressure, an extended drought, thin margins, and stiff competition combine to make farming an extremely challenging enterprise in SDC, as it is throughout the country. These are some of the factors that led to loss of approximately 1,000 farms in SDC between 2007 and 2012 (*2) and why the average age of farmers (which is now nearly 60 across the U.S.) continues to climb (*3).

Despite these challenges, a brave group of new and young farmers is emerging across the country, including in SDC (*4). Who are these new farmers? What challenges do they face? How can the good food movement support them? In 2015, the San Diego Food Systems Alliance's (SDFSFA's) Reducing Barriers to Farming Working Group partnered with Community Health Improvement Partners (CHIP) and other SDFSFA members to conduct a needs assessment of new and young farmers in SDC to answer these questions.

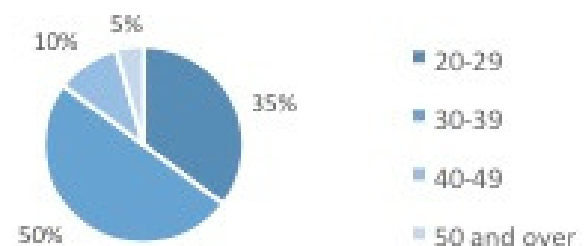
Methodology

In the summer of 2015, SDFSFA, CHIP, Leichtag Foundation, San Diego County Farm Bureau, and others collaboratively designed a survey to assess the needs of new and young farmers in the region. Existing surveys on the same topic conducted by leading new/young organizations such as the National Young Farmers Coalition and FarmLink were used as templates. Data was gathered in person at several farmer mixer events at the Leichtag Ranch in Encinitas, CA and through an online survey. The survey received 80 usable responses from new and young farmers, most of whom are located in SDC. As an optional survey implemented at several in-person events at the same location and distributed through selective networks, it is important to note that the survey sample may be biased and may not accurately represent the full population of SDC's new and young farmers. However, the survey was the first effort of its kind to deeply analyze the needs of new and young farmers in SDC. The results highlighted important trends in farmers' demographics, barriers, successes, and needs.

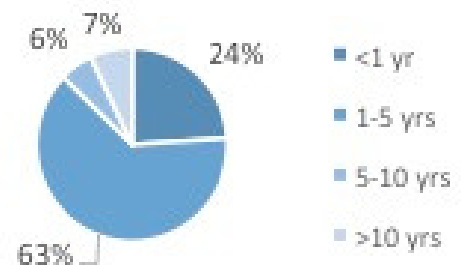
Demographic Profile

As expected, respondents who opted into the survey were young relative to the average U.S. farmer: 85% of respondents were under age 40 and 95% were under age 50. Almost 90% have less than 5 years of experience farming, with about a quarter (23%) in their first year. Notably, and more on this below, over half (56%) of respondents were female. Regarding race/ethnicity, 81% of new and young farmers were White/Caucasian, 9% Latino, 3% African-American, 3% Native American, and 4% other. Given the documented barriers faced by socially disadvantaged farmers, further research may be warranted to assess the different barriers faced and support strategies preferred by this specific subset of new and young farmers.

Age of New/Young Farmers Surveyed



Years of farming experience



Report downloadable at:

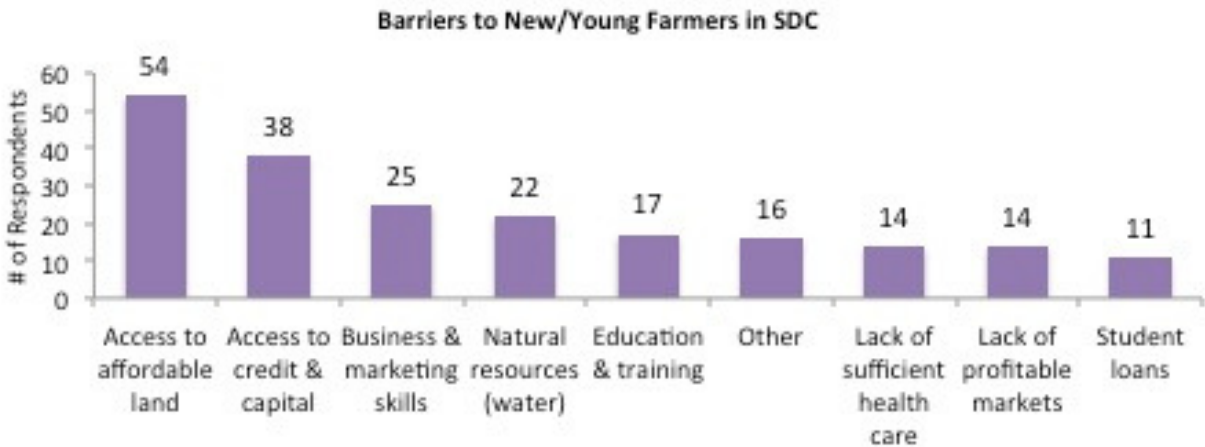
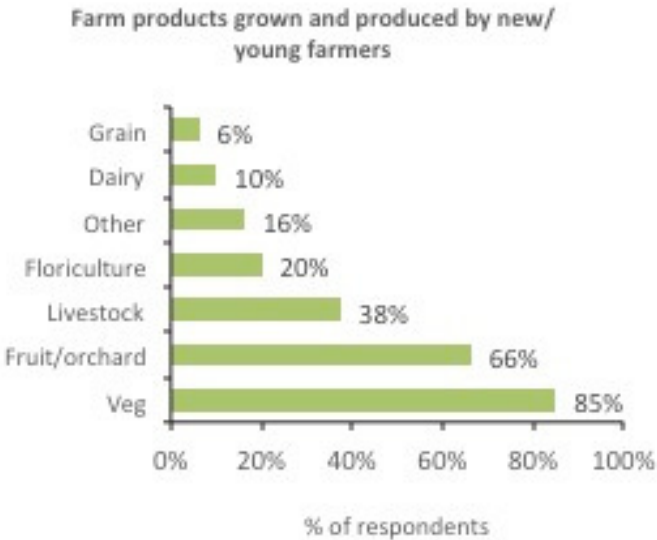
<http://www.sdfsfa.org/barriers-to-farming/>

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Results: Farm Products, Farming Practices, Land & Business Ownership

Examining the growing practices and the farm products grown, raised, and produced by these farmers can lend insight into the future of SDC agriculture. Most respondents reported having relatively diversified farm operations. Then most common farm product category being produced by these farmers was vegetables (85%), followed by fruit/orchard (66%), livestock (38%), and floriculture (20%). While the survey does not allow an analysis of farm products by acreage or value, the prevalence of fruits and vegetables among these new and young farmers in a County known predominantly for ornamentals and floriculture is notable.

The most frequent growing practices cited were organic but not certified (71%), then certified organic (13%), then conventional (10%). The prevalence of organic, non-certified growing practices (75% of all respondents) along with 15% producing at least some certified organic products signals a decided shift away from conventional practices toward organic among this group of new and young farmers. Respondents were split roughly evenly between four farm business and land ownership categories: those who own a farm business and own land, those who own a farm business and rent land, those who work someone else’s farm that owns land, and those who work on someone else’s farm who rents land. Overall, roughly 75% of respondents farm land they don’t own.



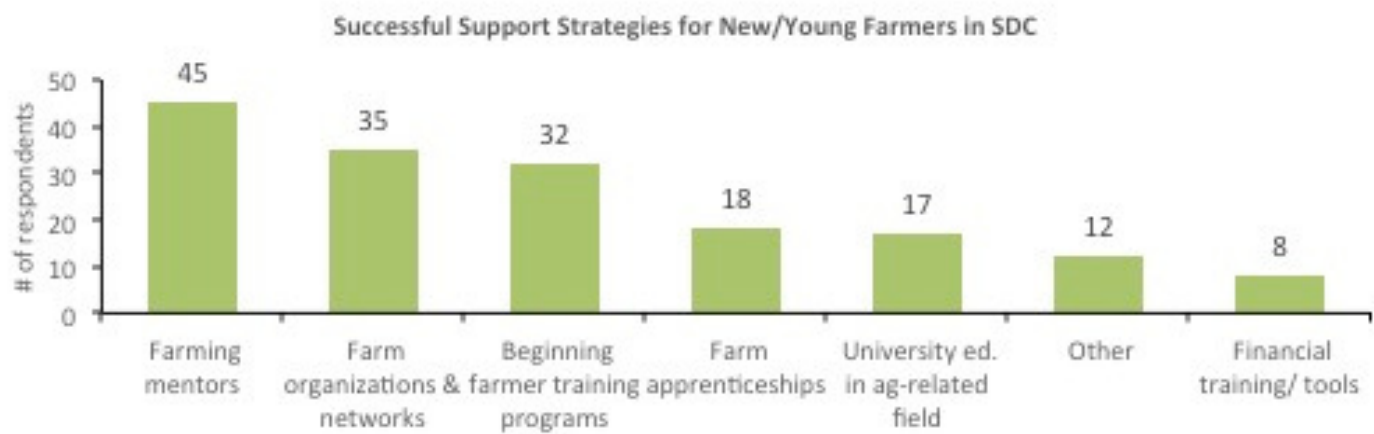
Results: Barriers and Support Strategies

Of particular interest to SDFS are the top barriers these new farmers face. The top barriers cited included access to affordable land (68%), access to credit and capital (48%), and business and marketing skills (32%). As one might expect, barriers vary by the respondents’ years of experience. For example, new farmers (<1 and 1-5 years) are more likely to cite access to affordable land (76% and 50%, respectively) as a top barrier but this disappears in this sample with more experienced farmers (>10 years). Conversely, student loans don’t emerge as an issue until farmers reach >5 years of experience. Notably, access to credit and capital is an issue for farmers regardless of experience.

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Many farmers summed up the twin challenges of affordable land and credit/capital with comments such as, “It’s very difficult to get started commercial farming on a small scale due to thin margins. Affordable land is hard to find and pushes farmers out to fringes of the county and at a distance from the market.” Another respondent wrote, “SDC in particular has a very high cost for land. This can create a problem for young farmers for obvious reasons. Farming to most banks is not considered something that could be a potential business so it can be hard to access capital.”

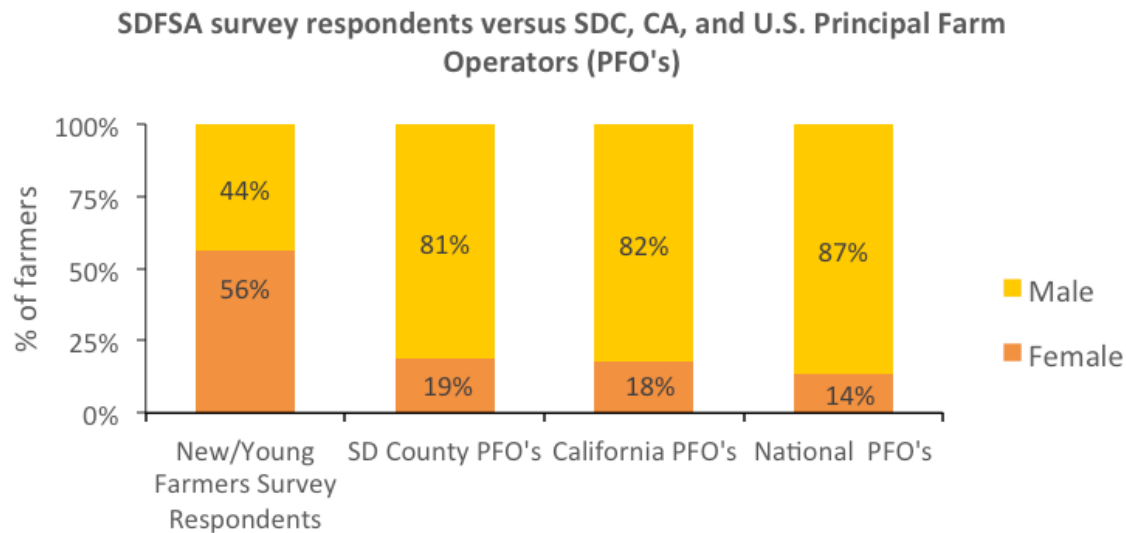
Also of interest to SDFSA are SDC’s new and young farmers’ most preferred support strategies. The top support strategies cited by respondents included farming mentors (65%), farm organizations and networks (51%), and beginning farmer training programs (46%). Also, 70% of respondents want support with business planning. Over half (52%) of responding new and young farmers surveyed have no business plan.



When asked for their top five sources of information, new and young farmers frequently cited Seeds@City, Wild Willow, ATTRA, California Certified Organic Farmers (CCOF), Worldwide Opportunities on Organic Farms (WWOOF), the National Young Farmers Coalition (NYFC), the San Diego Farm Bureau, the Farmer-to-Farmer Podcast, and personal research (i.e. books, internet, etc.). Outreach and engagement efforts to these new and young farmers should strategically align with these existing top sources of information where possible.

Results: More Women Farmers in San Diego County

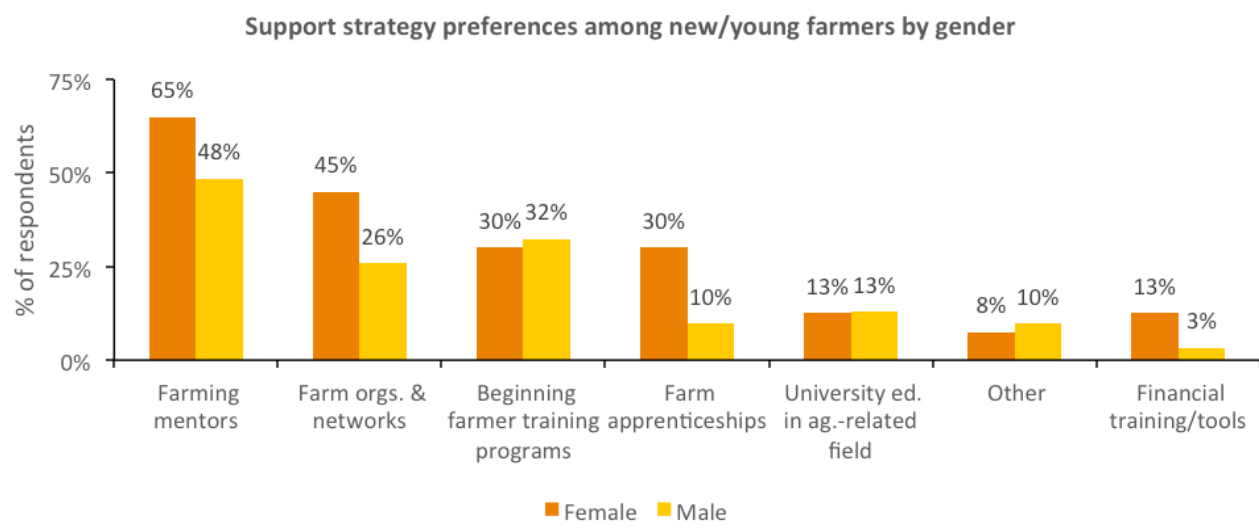
Returning to the gender breakdown, it’s an important result that over half (56%) of new/young farmers surveyed are women because nationally, according to the USDA’s 2012 Census of Agriculture, only 13.5% of principal farm operators (PFO’s) are women. In California it’s 18% and in SDC it’s a little higher (19%). Furthermore, between 2007 and 2012 the percentage of female PFO’s went down (6%) (*5).



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Even if many of the women farmers in this sample are not PFO's, our sample suggests that there are perhaps many more women going into farming in SDC compared to state and national trends. This data matches anecdotal feedback from local farmer training programs like Wild Willow and Seeds@City Farm, who tell us their incoming cohorts are increasingly female dominated (*6). Further research to confirm this trend is definitely warranted.

This potential gender shift in SDC agriculture is all the more important because there are some key differences among respondents by gender. First and foremost is a difference in land and business ownership: 55% of male respondents own a farm business compared to only 38% of females, and 29% of male respondents own land compared to 18% of females. Mirroring this trend, 53% of women respondents work on someone else's farm compared to 35% of male respondents. While the barriers cited are roughly similar by gender, there are differences in preferred support strategies: females cited farm apprenticeships, farming organizations and networks, and farming mentors as effective support strategies at a higher rate compared to males.



While this survey sample may not be perfectly representative of all new and young farmers in SDC, it appears that the future of farming may look very different gender-wise in the region. Given that male and female farmers appear have several key differences (i.e. business and land ownership, support strategies preferred, etc.), those working to support new and young farmers in the region should plan with these shifts in mind.

Conclusion

This needs assessments provides a baseline snapshot of the demographics, farming practices, barriers faced, and support strategies preferred by SDC's new and young farmers. SDFSAs members and partners are already using these results to take a data-driven approach to supporting the next generation of farmers. Emerging projects include promoting innovative financing tools, partnering with initiatives like FarmLink that are succeeding in helping new farmers access affordable land, public policy solutions, and supporting emerging young farmer network. Furthermore, this survey provides an excellent example of how basic primary research can strategically inform regional food systems efforts. Stay tuned for further SDFSAs resources and events to reduce barriers to farming in SDC, as well as SDFSAs broader work to support the development of a healthy and sustainable food system in San Diego County.

Sources

(*1) San Diego Farm Bureau, “SDC Agriculture Facts,” accessed at <https://www.sdfarmbureau.org/SD-Ag/Ag-Facts.php> in May, 2016.

(*2) United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) National Agricultural Statistics Service (NASS), 2012 Census of Agriculture, County Profiles, SDC, accessed at https://www.agcensus.usda.gov/Publications/2012/Online_Resources/County_Profiles/California/cp06073.pdf in May, 2016.

(*3) USDA NASS, 2012 Census of Agriculture, 2012 Census Highlights, accessed at https://www.agcensus.usda.gov/Publications/2012/Online_Resources/Highlights/Farm_Demographics/ in May, 2016.

(*4) For example, the National Young Farmers Coalition formed in 2010 to represent, mobilize, and engage young farmers to ensure their success. Learn more at <http://www.youngfarmers.org/>.

(*5) USDA NASS, 2012 Census of Agriculture, 2012 Census Highlights, accessed at https://www.agcensus.usda.gov/Publications/2012/Online_Resources/Highlights/Farm_Demographics/#fewer_women in May, 2016.

(*6) SDFSFA personal communication with Wild Willow and Seeds@City, Winter 2015/2016.

Report downloadable at:
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