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## **Latino co-op ramps up poultry production**

By Ken Meter

Lured by afternoon shade and feeding stations onto a grassy pasture, young chickens step gingerly from wood-frame enclosures, nibbling blades of grass and pecking at outdoor feed stations. Some might consider this a nostalgic glimpse of the past. Yet to a new Latino/Anglo farmers' coop based in Northfield, it forms the vision of a vibrant local-foods future.

Hillside Farmers Co-operative aims to build several of these small, free-range chicken operations over the next year, creating a close network of Latino-owned businesses that will provide ownership opportunities and livelihoods for new immigrants. These newcomers arrive with solid experience and an entrepreneurial spirit, says one co-op leader, Regi Haslett-Marroquin. Yet they need land, capital, and supportive social networks to thrive.

Regi has been one of the pioneers forging ahead to bring this vision to life. An agronomist by training, he also holds extensive experience he gained as a youth by farming in his native Guatemala. He has been selecting productive varieties of black beans for 14 years. He started six cooperatives in his native land. Once he arrived in Minnesota, he launched Peace Coffee. Yet he dismisses claims that he is exceptional. "The only difference between me and the average Central American immigrant is that I have a strong network of support around me," Regi says. Indeed, he recently won "Service to Mankind" awards from both the Northfield area and regional SERTOMA clubs.

Now he applies himself to the poultry trade, working in collaboration with several other neighboring farmers. Poultry, he says, is the first step to building wealth among new immigrants. The relatively quick turn-around from chick to market means that cash-strapped families can earn some income relatively quickly. After a few such cycles, Regi hopes, these families will be in a position to purchase land and develop other, even more diversified, farms nearby.

The chickens produced through Hillside Co-op will be the first free-range product to emerge in the Twin Cities market from Latino farms. Ultimately, Regi hopes, the birds will also be processed in the co-op's own processing plant.

In these starting years, however, Regi has lined up donations and short-term leases of land from supportive local landowners. He has networked with local economic developers, seeking collaborations and capital. The success of this venture, he says, relies upon the co-op's ability to organize elements of the mainstream economy — finance, farm inputs, social networks, and land — to support an unconventional outcome: ownership for Latinos. "We are rearranging the existing resources of the community to achieve different results," Regi adds.

This vision is framed, in part, as a response to the painful irony of the prevailing metro food system, which often depends on low-wage immigrants as a work force to present high-end gourmet options to Twin City customers.

Already, Latinos in Minnesota represent a \$4.4 billion consumer market, according to the Immigration Policy Center. Yet most immigrants arrive with no savings. Many send whatever surplus they make back home. This makes the path to ownership a tortuous one.

For those who enter Hillside Co-op's network, a path is beginning to take shape. For many, it begins at a Latino community garden just outside of Northfield — on donated land. Those with an entrepreneurial drive often show their resourcefulness by the way they cultivate, or the success they have in selling their products, from one of the garden's 105 plots. Results such as these telegraph to co-op leaders the promise of entering larger business pursuits.

Co-op leaders are now forming an “agri-preneurship” center for the Latino community — once again on donated land — so that those who show promise can get more formal training in writing a business plan, building supportive business networks, learning regulatory processes, and so forth. Those who thrive in these early training steps will be asked, in turn, to mentor newcomers in future years.

Yet the co-op also must surround these entrepreneurs with business systems that work financially in a competitive marketplace. To accomplish this, Regi wants to build clusters of small chicken operations. In effect, this means scaling up by staying small. Each chicken operation will be designed to be within the means of one family to manage, occupying one quarter of an acre. The barns will be modular units made of wood struts and plastic sheets, constructed by a local craftsman using co-op designs. Each requires less than 20 hours to build. These units can then be assembled rapidly in the field, in a span of only one or two days. This also makes the barns relatively easy to move if families relocate. Once 30 barns are in working order, the co-op will have the capacity to raise 75,000 birds annually, Regi says.

While Regi and fellow co-op leader Jose Javier showed me around their farm, explaining their vision, they pointed out that the “free-range” label is hardly the whole story. Since their chickens feed outside every day, the co-op would prefer to say the chickens “have the option to go indoors.” This is in sharp contrast to “free-range” labels under which chickens are provided a door that leads outside, but never think to walk through it.

The co-op's chickens **are** fed without antibiotics with a diet rich in omega fatty acids, so the meat should be healthy for human hearts. To the greatest extent possible, the birds will be fed with grains and grasses raised directly on co-op farms. As farmers trade skills, feed, and shipping duties with each other, a networked group of businesses will form, Regi says.

Several miles down the road in Cannon Falls, a second poultry operation has been launched on Todd Prink's Oakridge Farm. Prink has farmed in that area all his life, and switched to organic methods in 1985. Todd was introduced to Regi at a meeting dedicated to promoting local foods. “He intrigued me,” Todd says. “I could tell he was a doer.” Although Todd was primarily a grain farmer, he became intrigued with Regi's plan for chicken barns.

Moreover, he was already growing organic corn, oats, alfalfa, and hay, which the chickens could eat. So, he joined the cooperative and built a chicken barn on his land. There, in partnership with Eladio Carpio-de-Evans, he has helped raise nearly 1,000 chickens. “As a team, we can do a lot to change the food system in America,” Todd says.

As the weather warms next spring, each poultry farmer will plant grass around their new barn for the young chicks to eat. This will be supplemented with sprouted barley and organic corn. Minerals will be harvested from deeper soil layers through biological processes. Eventually, as practices ramp up, individual farmers will rotate grains, grasses, and perennial crops in their fields, along with the manure from the chickens raised on each plot, building soil fertility without chemical applications. Raising these farm inputs on each farm will itself contribute a great deal to the Southeast Minnesota economy, which now buys hundreds of millions of farm inputs from distant suppliers.

Eventually, the co-op hopes to introduce heritage poultry breeds. But the vision does not stop there. Regi is already planting diverse crops such as apples, sweet corn, and hazelnuts in his poultry yards, since he has noticed that the chickens both fertilize these crops and till the soil as they root for feed. He is also experimenting with legume and pig production on similar small scales. Such intensive use of the land, using complementary natural processes, he adds, is something he learned as he grew up in Guatemala. Because of this practical background, he says, he can understand natural cycles in ways that many Minnesotans miss. “These complementary processes are already at work here in Minnesota,” he admonishes. “They’re right in front of your eyes.”

Once processed, the co-ops chickens will be marketed jointly with Thousand Hills Cattle Company under a “Home on the Range” label. Until it produces enough volume, the co-op relies upon nearby processors to create a certified, marketable product.

So far Regi and another co-op member, Jose Javier, have produced 6,800 chickens on Finca Mirasol, which are available for sale from a freezer on the farm on Friday afternoons during the growing season. Regi says he has already won commitments from regional buyers to purchase tens of thousands of birds next year.

Regi promises this production system will be deeply resilient, since the co-op is well aware that it faces highly unpredictable market conditions, and uncertainty about the availability and price of fossil fuels. “I see a lot of efficiency in the smallness of the operations we are building,” he says. Small producers can change production plans readily, since they will not be tied down by debt. Since co-op members will make only part of their income from poultry, they will have other options should demand ever sag. The co-op does not intend to build any barns until it has sold enough birds to merit each expansion. “The speed at which the market pulls us in will determine how fast we proceed,” Regi adds.

Another key element in the system’s flexibility is its decentralized governance. Each unit operates within a system of relationships, but makes individual decisions on how to operate. Hillside Co-op will become one part of a co-operative of co-operatives as new producers are added.

“There is nothing I am doing today that I did not learn by working on farms in Guatemala,” Regi adds. Indeed, Latinos’ practical experience of working with limited resources seems to be an essential element of the success of the model. “That’s why we need to set up more immigrants as farmers,” he concludes.