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## A real world experience in rural Marine

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### *Nonprofit farm trains immigrants in organic method*

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MARINE ON ST. CROIX — After working the night shift as a nurse, on most afternoons this summer Moses Momanyi works a second job — as a farmer.

Momanyi is working one of 13 mini-farms at the Big River Farms CSA (Community Supported Agriculture) in Marine on St. Croix this summer. Tending to parcels of between half an acre and three acres is not a hobby, it's a business with production schedules and customers. For some, it might be a new career.

"I want to be a farmer eventually," said Momanyi, a Stillwater resident who moved to the United States from a farming community in Kenya five years ago.

The idea is not far-fetched. Small farms might be making a comeback as the demand for locally grown food and in many cases organic food increases.

"Food-related diseases have increased for the last 30 to 40 years," said Big River executive director Glen Hill. Hill also notes the recent high-profile jalapeno and peanut butter scares as reasons consumers are seeking different food sources.

"Is our food system sustainable?" he asked. "Is our food system secure?"

That's how Big River Farms and about 50 other CSAs in Minnesota and Wisconsin serve the region, according to the Land Stewardship Project Website. Community-supported agriculture is exactly that — agriculture supported by people. Members of each CSA buy shares at the beginning of the season, which helps farmers pay for seeds, tools and labor throughout the entire season, rather than only at the harvest. In return, members receive a box of seasonal vegetables each week for 18 weeks.

Essentially, they are buying vegetables in advance, Hill said.

The closer connection to the production process is a key for many members, Hill said. While CSAs and big corporate farms have to meet the same safety standards, most food on the U.S. market travels 1,500 miles from major production centers such as Texas, California and Florida, said Hill. To illustrate



Yia Lee picks green beans at the Big River Farm. - Photo by Paul Dols

how concentrated the industry can be, Hill said about 80 percent of the country's lettuce goes through four processing plants. One contamination can affect a huge supply, though CSAs aren't immune to the problems.

"The difference is the scale of a mistake," Hill said, "and the intangible care that goes into a smaller operation."

When a CSA has 10 to 15 employees, they have more of a stake. "It's your reputation," Hill said.

Big River Farms is not a

typical CSA

Most CSAs are for-profit organizations set up and run by professionals. Big River Farms is an arm of the nonprofit Minnesota Food Association whose mission is training aspiring immigrant farmers like Momanyi and Vicki Yang and Yee Yang, cousins originally from Laos. As such, Big River is funded largely through grants from the Minnesota Department of Agriculture, private foundations and small donations. About one-third of its approximate \$400,000 budget is generated through sales to wholesalers and CSA memberships, according to Hill.

The nonprofit also gets revenues from its participants. A \$200 training fee covers about a dozen in-field workshops during the planting season and 10 winter workshops to prepare for the season. Topics include business planning, taxes, marketing, food safety and soil fertility. Each farmer also pays \$500 per acre to use the land and a \$200 marketing fee.

The \$900 does not represent the true cost of the services, which includes a four-person staff they can consult, use of a storage cooler, between-row tilling, fences and insurance.

Although subsidized, the fees represent budget items that must be taken into account as an independent farmer.

Hill calls the training "a real-world experience that is mentored." Easing into the rigors of the marketplace is another form of support. Each mini-farm manager sells produce to Big River Farms, which acts as mentor and customer. From there, Big River Farms works with outside vendors and members like other CSAs, serving 117 members and selling to four wholesalers: Chipotle Mexican Grill, Lund Food Holdings Inc., Whole Foods Market and H. Brooks and Co.

That's important because nearly all the mini-farm operators have full-time jobs and work around those schedules. They can concentrate on the farming for now.

"Almost all the farmers here have an agrarian background," said farm manager Blyth.

While Minnesota has a different climate and soil types, one of the most difficult points to explain is the Western standard of blemish-free produce, Blyth said. As far as troubleshooting problems, it's a process. One difference in Minnesota is the pests, for example, there are no flea beetles in Kenya.

Blyth notes that the farmers don't take his advice as gospel. To combat bugs, Blyth suggested row covers as a solution for Momanyi, who initially balked until seeing how well they worked (Blyth and the staff farm a parcel to fill any gaps in the orders). Momanyi has since bought three rolls of row cover. (In Kenya, pesticide use was common. Big River Farms is an organic operation).

This is part of the evolution of the training program. Hill said previous incarnations of the training program consisted of seminars and demonstrations. However, "farmers don't learn by observing."

On Wednesday, Vicki and Yee Yang had just finished dealing with an iconic Minnesota pest: the gopher. They soon found that gophers like to eat the corn seeds they planted. A trip to a discount retailer for dozens upon dozens of paper cups individually placed over each seed did the trick.

Next up when the ears came in: raccoons!

Still tinkering with the program

Momanyi hopes to buy five to seven acres in two or three years, which is right about on schedule for the three-year training program at Big River Farms.

However, Hill makes the hand weeding and gopher battles sound like the easy part; vendors value and require attention too. Other considerations include weighing the costs and benefits of leasing or owning the land you farm. "When I get there, I'll see which one is the best option," Momanyi said of buying or leasing land.

Helping distribute other products through existing networks is one avenue to a market. In the past, Big River helped distribute free-range chickens with a Latino cooperative. This year it is working with Fruit Share, which delivers nine to 12 pounds of fruit each week to the 23 members who have signed up, Hill said.

So far, the training program at Big River has one farmer who has graduated to start a new 15-member CSA. Hill believes the program has to extend a little longer to help farmers make the transition to a separate operation.

"It's a big step," he said.

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