

Hmong Farmers Losing Battle Against Drought

By Erica
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Groups of California farmers have been struggling to survive the state's epic drought, and this year one group has started to lose the fight. Fresno County's Hmong refugee producers are some of the state's newest and most disadvantaged farmers — and they cannot afford the water necessary to keep their businesses going. Emergency loans are available from the government but, as many are discovering, the help is often too little too late.

Drying wells and shrinking bank accounts

Of the many vendors at Fresno County farmers markets, Hmong grower May Vu is kind of famous.

"They call her 'May Flowers' for all the flowers that she's grown," explains Jon Thao, an advocate for the area's Hmong farmers and a distant relative of Vu. Both Vu and Thao are standing in a field off Highway 41, pointing out the sunflowers that mark the beginning of Vu's plot of land.

"In the past, [Vu] had 11 acres, so you can imagine ... it's kind of hard," says Thao.

Vu was leasing 11 acres in the spring — enough to bring in \$2,000 a week. She grew flowers, broccoli, cilantro, green onion and Asian crops like sinqua and bitter melon. But early this summer, Vu's well started to dry up. She was getting less water at a higher price, and producing fewer crops of worse quality. So her only option was to downsize from 11 acres to 5.

Farming was the main skill this refugee population brought from Laos in the '70s and '80s – and it's still one of the few ways families can climb out of poverty.

Chukou Thao, executive director of National Hmong American Farmers, says it was around June when he got a call for help from Vu. Thao's organization, which primarily advocates for refugee farmers from Laos, had already been receiving panicked calls from other local growers at the time.

"We were thinking that maybe it's just the pump. Maybe the pump went out," recalls Thao. That was before he started to realize that too many pumps were failing for too many farmers.

"There's one, two, three, 50-plus farmers whose pumps have gone out," Thao says.

Fifty farmers are a tiny fraction of Fresno County's 2,500 Hmong producers, but Thao says they are the worst off. Farming was the main skill that this refugee population brought from Laos in the '70s and '80s. Today, it is still one of the few ways families are able to climb out of poverty. So it is not surprising that the Hmong tend to invest their life savings on the harvest each year.

But if the wells go dry, so do their bank accounts.

Financial aid, just out of reach

Back in the summer, May Vu had decided to dig her well deeper on what was then her 5-acre farm. The dig had a price tag of \$7,000 — a fraction of the million-dollar wells some big farms have been putting in — but still an amount she could not really afford. So Vu tried to get some financial help from the local offices of the USDA Farm Service Agency, or FSA. There was just one problem: Vu did not own her land — a requirement for receiving aid from the FSA's Emergency Farm Loan program.

According to Thao, about 80 percent of Hmong growers in the Central Valley lease their land. So even though the FSA offers emergency loans to help farmers survive disasters like the state's three-year drought, many farmers like Vu are not able to access them. Those who can are not guaranteed to get the loan when they need it.

John Oosterman, farm loan chief for the state's FSA, is sympathetic to farmers hit hard by the drought. However, approving loan applications takes time, he says. Evaluating an application can take a loan officer up to 60 days and is just the first step in the review process. In total, getting a loan request approved can take up to four months — which Thao of National Hmong American Farmers finds frustrating.

"Let's say they needed \$10,000 to fix their pump so that they can get water," says Thao. "So maybe the crop goes one week without water, right? By the time they got the money, there's nothing left."

Relying on the rain

May Vu did not get help from the FSA, but she was able to persuade her landowner to split the cost of digging the well deeper on her 5-acre farm. And for a few weeks in September and October, water flowed again. But then, just like before, the well ran dry. So she packed up her things and moved to an available acre on her brother's property. Now Vu earns about \$200 per week — down from the days of \$2,000 per week. In total, Vu says, trying to save her business has cost \$40,000.

"If [the Hmong] don't farm, this is it," says Thao. "It's not like they can go out there and get a job. If they don't farm, I don't know what they're going to be doing."

Oosterman of the FSA says the Fresno County office is hiring another farm loan officer to speed up the application review process. For farmers like Vu, though, the only thing left to rely on is the rain.

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