

## **The Cultural Component of Community Food Systems**

An educational session at the 2007 Southern SAWG Annual Conference

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### **Presenters**

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### **Summary and Highlights**

The purpose of this session was to discuss farming issues from a Hispanic viewpoint and take a look at one example of how to build business relationships with people of other cultures in creating sustainable food systems.

**Juan Martinez** presented Hispanic farming issues, drawing on years of research and working with Latino farmers in Michigan and the Southern U.S. He noted that Hispanics are not a homogeneous group. Over 23 countries make up this ethnic group, comprising different languages, cultures and religions. Latinos are now the largest minority group in 26 states (western states, northeast corridor, and Florida). There is rapid Hispanic growth in counties in the non-metro South, especially in the top poultry producing counties in the South (LA and AR). There are over 10 million Hispanics in the South.

Large numbers of Latino immigrants are working in landscape, service occupations, construction and agriculture. Exploring the undercounts in the agricultural census, Martinez finds that African American farmers are among the first to sell to Hispanic farmers. He suggests that people should make social connections with Hispanic and Muslim farmers to improve food security issues. Learn their language preferences and be aware that educational attainment may be low.

**Barry Colley** presented a case study of how he is helping African American farmers tap into the growing ethnic food market in the South. Growth in the ethnic food market is being driven by Africans, Asians and Hispanics. Although each have distinct food preferences, there is some overlap in tastes. The ethnic food market reached \$142 billion in sales in 2006, with \$10 billion in the Miami/Ft Lauderdale region alone. Colley says "An excellent cross cultural relationship is oil for the ethnic food market engine that drives profit."

In 2006 Colley began working with the Arkansas Delta Produce Marketing Association, LLC to produce and market sweet potato greens for African markets in the Houston area. The Marketing Association is made up of five African American farmers. They formed an LLC because coops don't work for them. Although there is demand for a product they can grow and a six-month marketing window, there are also many challenges, including perishability, handling, labor, post-harvest storage, etc. Next steps will be to build technical support, scheduling and coordination. A system that creates direct marketing without going through middle men is crucial for profitability.