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How Ethanol is Hurting the State's Hmong Farmers

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Laura M. Kerr and William G. Moseley: How ethanol is hurting the state's Hmong farmers

Their small farms on rented land are profitable but vulnerable to a growing demand for corn.

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The ethanol boom has led to the greatest expansion of corn farming in the Midwest in years. This boom is in part driven by the belief that ethanol represents a green alternative to gasoline. But rising corn acreage is now displacing environmentally savvy Hmong vegetable growers, who primarily operate on rented land at the urban fringe of the Twin Cities.

When they arrived here from Laos after the Vietnam War, many Hmong began tending to personal gardens given their previous experience as small farmers. Some sought to make a living producing vegetables.

Despite the efforts of local agricultural agents, many Hmong vegetable growers accept American industrial farming practices only selectively, due to their own concerns about health and ecological balance.

Rather than work large fields of a single crop supported by heavy pesticide and chemical fertilizer use, most Hmong employ traditional techniques, such as the mixing of crops and manual weeding, to maintain soil fertility and manage pest problems. While many Hmong growers can't qualify for organic certification because they are farming on rented land, they have bolstered organic production in the upper Midwest and provided added vigor to the local agriculture and farmers' market scenes.

Most Hmong farmers in the Twin Cities area have been renting land from grain farmers. Gaining access to such land was not usually an issue until the recent ethanol boom spurred the demand for corn.

We may think of corn-based ethanol as a renewable resource that is grown rather than mined like fossil fuels. In fact, the amount of petroleum energy used to produce a typical acre of corn is considerable when all of the inputs, such as fertilizers, pesticides and tractor fuel, are considered. Add in the fuel used to transport and process corn into ethanol, and most scientists find that we are only gaining 20 to 25 percent in energy resources. Not only are the gains in energy independence often overstated for ethanol, but industrial corn production typically leads to contamination of surface and ground water because of pesticide and fertilizer runoff.

But surely, you may ask, the typical Minnesota farm, at 340 acres, must be more efficient

than the average 5-acre Hmong farm? In fact, since most Hmong growers use less expensive bio-organic techniques to control pests and maintain soil fertility, their farms are three times as profitable as the typical Minnesota one on a per acre basis ($1,800 net income per acre vs. $600).

If the organic practices employed by Hmong farmers are more profitable and better for the environment, why doesn't the market allow this form of agriculture to displace less efficient corn production? First, many Hmong find it difficult to access the loans needed to purchase farmland because of language barriers and limited collateral. Second, U.S. agricultural subsidies have long favored industrial grain farming over smaller-scale organic production.

In resisting the wholesale adoption of industrial agricultural practices, the Hmong of Minnesota have led the way in showing the rest of America an alternative approach that requires less fossil fuel energy and is better for the environment. Their methods deserve support.

Laura M. Kerr, who recently graduated from Macalester College, completed her senior honors thesis on Hmong farming in the Twin Cities. William G. Moseley is an associate professor of geography at Macalester.