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# UC ANR project to help underserved farmers in SoCal with land ownership

## The Climate Action and Land Equity project prioritizes land use for food production as a reinvestment into the greater community.

by Saoimanu Sope

San Diego County has more than 5,000 small farms but less than 2% are operated or owned by Black, Indigenous, or people of color — including those of Asian, Hispanic or Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander descent, according to the 2022 Ag Census.

The reasons vary, but historically, multiple marginalized communities of color have not received the same opportunities or support for land ownership or management as their white counterparts.

Chandra Richards, University of California Cooperative Extension (UCCE) land equity academic coordinator for the Southern California region, is identifying barriers to equity when it comes to addressing land access, tenure, management and opportunities to increase the diversity of land managers and land ownership in the region.

Richards is the principal investigator for the Climate Action and Land Equity (CALE) project administered through UC Agriculture and Natural Resources and funded by the Department of Conservation. CALE aims to engage historically underrepresented communities in coalition building, capacity assessment and climate action planning. CALE elevates knowledge about the challenges and opportunities to land access and management for a diversity of land managers.

Chandra Richards (left) and Joyce Nkhoma (right). *Photo*: Saoimanu Sope.

Among the challenges is land tenure, an established agreement between a landowner and tenant, outlining the purpose and use of the land over a period of time. However, when landowners decide to sell their land, these agreements are at risk of being null and void, forcing the tenants to renegotiate or discontinue their operation.

Land tenure leases for under five years are considered short-term, which are common in Southern California. For small, new and under-resourced farmers, landowner turnover doesn't just threaten their business plan but their livelihood.

For small farmer Byron Nkhoma, who leases land in Ramona to grow leafy greens and vegetables, the possibility of losing land is a constant worry. Since 2015, Nkhoma and his wife, Joyce, have been renting four of 20 acres to establish Hukama Produce. Over nine years, they have had two landowners. Before the land was sold to his current landowner, Nkhoma said he considered buying land, but the process proved more challenging than he thought.

"What it takes for someone like Byron to find a place to farm and establish a food system is an extremely involved process," said Richards. "It's not just learning how to obtain land, it's also about managing that land so it can be used for years and generations to come."

Originally from Zimbabwe, Nkhoma is adamant about taking care of the land he leases and has applied knowledge from his home to ensure resilience. Hukama Produce prides itself in improving environmental health through sustainable farming practices such as compost and mulch application, drip irrigation and low till. An important pillar of the CALE project includes building capacity and providing technical assistance toward land conservation and climate resiliency.

In addition to land tenure, money and time are stressors for small farmers. When they are not working on the farm, Nkhoma and his wife are researching and applying for grants to improve their soils and protect their crops from pests. However, many grants for which Hukama Produce is eligible often have pressing deadlines that demand their immediate attention — cutting

Some of the crops grown at Hukama Produce farm in Ramona. *Photo*: Saoimanu Sope.

into valuable time that could be spent tending to the land or selling at farmer's markets.

Two of Hukama's goals include building and sustaining trust in the market and growing their operation. By partnering with Richards, Hukama Produce has direct access to technical assistance focused on grant writing and conservation to increase ecosystem health and build tenure.

Agricultural land tenure is the arrangement, rights, and responsibilities centered around use, management, and ownership of agricultural land and resources. Building land tenure means that farmers have a stable place to grow their crops and build environmental sustainability without risk of having to move their operations.

While the CALE project boosts support for historically underserved community members hoping to own or manage land, it prioritizes land use for food production as a reinvestment into the greater community.

Eager to bring realities like Nhkoma's to light, Richards partnered with Keith Nathaniel, UCCE director for Los Angeles County, who co-coordinated the Western Extension Leadership Development (WELD) conference held in San Diego the week of Sept. 23–27. WELD unites Cooperative Extension faculty, agents, advisors, educators and specialists from the western region of the United States for a two-year leadership development program.

While in San Diego, WELD participants joined Richards for a tour of Hukama Produce and learned directly from Nkhoma about opportunities and threats as a small farmer. The tour ended with participants in a circle, sharing how their professional roles can offer support to Hukama Produce and other small farms.

"We grow food so that we can feed the community," said Nkhoma. "When we feed others, we build relationships. That's what 'hukama' means — to grow relationships."

If you operate or know of a small farm in Southern California and would like to be involved with or receive regular updates about the CALE project, please contact Chandra Richards at cmrichards@ucanr.edu. CA

Nkhoma demonstrates how he manages gophers on his farm. *Photo*: Saoimanu Sope.