

A Story of Compassion

USDA Faith-Based and Community Initiatives

New American Farmers in Alaska

Anchorage, Alaska



Beginning in the fall of 2006, Catholic Social Services Refugee Assistance and Immigration Services (RAIS) began several successful outreach initiatives, activities, and support to immigrant and refugees in Anchorage and Delta Junction, Alaska. United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) Risk Management Agency (RMA) partnered with RAIS to create **Rural Initiative for New American Farmers in Alaska**. This education partnership gave a significant number of Chinese, Hmong, and Russian residents the opportunity to continue their ancestry of agricultural backgrounds and become involved in small-scale agriculture in Alaska.

With visions of producing an extensive list of vegetables, they established a farmer's market booth and logo, officially naming it Fresh International Gardens (FIG). Karen Ferguson, Program Director, oversaw the organization of collaborators throughout the project. "Here in Alaska our winters are very long, so indoor workshops provided the perfect opportunity to conduct educational classes. In Anchorage, we began meeting in February through May reviewing vocabulary words, matching pictures to words and crops, including over 20 different produce vegetables and seed packets.

In Delta Junction, we met March through May with translated education materials and presentations on Alaska agriculture; record keeping through Quick Books and tax preparation; food handling and preservation; marketing; farm equipment operation and farm safety; bee keeping and meat butchering."

Amazed by the project's goals and objectives, the Municipality of Anchorage donated a quarter acre plot of land (free land lease) within McPhee Park in the Mountain View area. Evergreen Nursery, Inc. contributed their time for excavating the land, donated a new layer of virgin top soil, lime and fertilizer, seeds and plant starts, including moose fencing around the entire garden.

Bill Webb, owner/manager of Anchorage Farmer's Market & Festival, donated free market space, a tent, and a presentation about establishing and running a booth. His presentation included offering the availability of accepting WIC (Women, Infant, and Children), United Way Senior Farmer's Market Nutrition Program coupons, and personal checks from customers.

Brian Kuzel, Catholic Social Service Grant Administrator, found the project brought about one unexpected very fundamental success: the development of English skills among participants. "This was not just about teaching folks who have traveled from a different country how to run a business in America," said Kuzel. "It was a hands-on U.S. orientation in producing and preparing fresh, healthy food and learning the concepts of budgeting, profit, sales.

Near the end of the season the garden farm had such an abundance of produce, they had to purchase an additional table for the FIG market stand. Total produce food sales provided an income of \$6,615.10 (68% cash, 23% WIC, 7% Senior Coupons and 2% personal check). A total of 1012.25 hours were invested by the participating refugee



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farmers on the garden farm and farmer's market locations. Income was distributed to farmer participants dependent upon the number of hours volunteered.

Anchorage TV station **KTVA** aired two news casts highlighting the Fresh International Gardens farmers market stand in downtown Anchorage, and specifically two Hmong project participants, Bee Vang and Yang Pao Lee. Click [here](#) to view the newscasts.

