

OPINION › COMMENTARY

# Guest Commentary | Small, BIPOC local farmers need our help after floods

By [SANTA CRUZ SENTINEL](#) |

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By **Ami Chen Mills and Eloy Ortiz**

For seven years, Rosa and Filemon Regalado's family of seven lived in a trailer on a piece of land just off Highway 101 in Hollister, as the couple worked their way up from picking strawberries and produce in the fields to leasing some land and becoming small farmers themselves. They also made the challenging but beneficial transition from conventional to organic and regenerative farming to protect the health of the land they farmed, as well as their own and their customers' health.

The Regalados were just getting ready to purchase their leased land when the deluges of January and March ruined fields, crops and equipment. Along with many other Latinx farmers and Hmong farmers in the Pajaro area and Salinas Valley, the Regalados have seen their livelihoods, their dreams and visions swept away by the torrents of water from which we are just beginning to dry out.



In Royal Oaks, Bertha saw the plastic sheeting for her strawberries destroyed as water streamed downhill, cracking her farmland wide open and leaving deep arroyos across her farmland. So far this year, she and other small, Central Coast organic farmers have lost two crop rotations – which translates into tens of thousands of dollars in lost income.

Near Gilroy, Maria had standing water up to five feet in her living room and her fields, tractors, hoop houses and even trucks were destroyed by the floods. She is now living in a single hotel room with her family of four and wondering how to get back into farming.

Many of these small farmers produce the food you and I eat when we go to Staff of Life, the Food Bin, New Leaf and farmers markets, or when we pick up our CSA shares. By contrast with large-scale commercial ag enterprises in our region, most of the food grown by small farmers locally will end up in our bellies. Large scale producers ship a huge portion of our produce out of state and even out of the country. It is in the interest of local food security to support small farmers, who often grow more diverse crops than “Big Ag” and who can be more flexible with their crops when the need arises.

Many of these farmers are migrants, like most of our farm workers – and all of them keep us fed as a region and nation. Now, they are falling through the cracks of FEMA and SBA aid efforts. Many do not have Social Security numbers to qualify for federal aid. And because they do not have highly paid lobbyists to “lunch” with legislators, their farming needs are not well known to elected officials. Yet, as one such younger farmer recently said in a local meeting that included a representative from a nearby congressman’s office, “We experience racism, but we grow food; we contribute to the economy; we pay taxes and we hire people!”

Is it fair these farmers are being ignored?

The organizations where we work and volunteer are hustling to support these minority farmers. Because of efforts from the statewide Community Alliance with Family Farmers (CAFF), a program with the California Department of Food and Agriculture (CDFA) was instituted during the first wave of COVID to support “underserved producers” of food in our state.



At least \$5 million in relief funds at the state level must be immediately diverted to the California Underserved and Small Producers program at the CDFA to support family farmers who mostly do not speak English, who have worked all their lives to feed us and who are now trying to make it as farmers. This needs to happen before budget negotiations end on May 10.

If you support small farmers and social and economic justice, please contact your local, state and national representatives to make sure these funds are supplied for our local, disadvantaged farmers.

*Ami Chen Mills is Executive Director, Sustainable Systems Research Foundation, Santa Cruz and Central Coast. Eloy Ortiz is Board President, of the Center for Farmworker Families, Watsonville, and Committee for Organic and Regenerative Agriculture, Santa Cruz County.*

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