

# FSA Loan Officer Customer Service Pays Off for Immigrant Farmer - FSA Fence Post

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A loan from FSA bought Hongye Gao a new tractor that has helped his farm to flourish.

The USDA Farm Service Agency in Hawaii is going above and beyond to assist minority farmers in the Aloha State. Thomas Nii, Assistant Farm Loan Manager of the Honolulu County Office recently mentored Chinese immigrant farmer Hongye Gao and his wife Sokha lth through some earlier credit issues, which enabled Gao to secure a loan with the Farm Service Agency for a much needed tractor.

When he came to the Farm Service Agency, Mr. Gao had been farming 25 acres of subleased

property for nearly thirteen years, twelve years as a Farm Manager and nine months on his own (In Hawaii, the cost of land can be very high and many farmers can only afford to lease rather than purchase land.) Gao specializes in a variety of Asian crops including Thai Basil, Lemon Basil, Taro Leaf, and Thai Ginger.

As a start up operation, Gao had very limited resources and equipment. He came to the Farm Service Agency Honolulu County office to inquire about financing for a new tractor as he was running his entire 25 acre operation with a very old used tractor, held together by bungee cords with rocks tied to its attachments to weigh it down. Gao had ordered a brand new tractor from a local dealer who was to provide financing. The dealer assured him that he was preapproved for the purchase; however, when the tractor arrived on the island, he was notified by the dealer that they would not be able to finance the purchase because of his credit status.

Gao's credit issues began several years earlier when he attempted to help a friend by co-signing a loan. Due to the language barrier, Gao was unaware that he was the sole borrower and that the loan had become delinquent and was on the verge of being sent for collection. With translation assistance from Gao's wife, Nii assisted the applicant with contacting the bank on several occasions to resolve the issue. Because of Nii's persistence he was eventually able to speak with a supervisor to explain the details of Mr. Gao's situation. As a result, the supervisor was more understanding and allowed Mr. Gao to resolve the issue through a custom payment plan. The plan also provided Gao with a provision to pay off the debt at a discounted amount when financially feasible.

With Nii's help, the Gao family was able to overcome social, cultural, and language barriers in order to achieve a positive result. Once the credit issue was resolved, Gao was able to obtain financing through the Farm Service Agency. Less than a year later, Gao's operation has been flourishing thanks to the new tractor. Profits have gone up significantly and he recently paid off his delinquent debt at a discounted rate. He also recently purchased a refrigeration unit and is now shipping all of his crops directly to the mainland instead of relying on wholesale buyers.