

Sustainable agriculture is not only defined by ecologically-sound farming, but also by sharing food-related ideas and forging a strong relationship between people in a community, their food and the farmers responsible for providing it. Sustainable agriculture cannot succeed without innovation on the grassroots level and strong community-based support.

That's why farmers and business leaders in the vicinity of Hardwick are devoting their time to working on new initiatives in family-scale farming from the bottom up. The fruit of their efforts is apparent in the formation of the Center for an Agricultural Economy, presided over by Board President and fervent natural food advocate and seed company entrepreneur, Tom Stearns.

The Center for an Agricultural Economy is a nonprofit organization founded in 2004 by Vermont Soy owner, Andrew Meyer. It was established in response to a request by the Sustainable Business Owners Network, an informal network and support group of local business owners in the sustainable agricultural districts in Hardwick, started by Stearns, and Pete Johnson of Pete's Greens. Members of the Network thought it would be prudent to have a non-profit as the vehicle for making their ideas a reality. In 2008 the Center opened an office in Hardwick and hired Monty Fischer as their executive director.

The Center for an Agricultural Economy provides a forum where forward-thinkers in the food sector can not only collectively brainstorm about how to better foster a thriving organic foods system that would actively engage local residents, but to take proactive steps in implementing projects to accomplish this goal.

Stearns' fierce devotion to organic growing, his strong sense of community and his entrepreneurial spirit were most likely the motivating factors in his being elected president of the Center's Board of Directors.

However, this leadership role is not new to Stearns. In addition to his function at the Center and his coordinating role in the Sustainable Business Owners Network, Stearns is also the founder and owner of High Mowing Seeds, a company that specializes in producing seeds that are 100% certified organic.

In 1996, Stearns moved to Vermont and began to build on the seed catalogue he started in Arizona the year before as an undergraduate in the sustainable agriculture program at Prescott College. Around this time he began to get a sense of the business aspect of his enterprise. After visiting other seed companies, none of which offered organic-only seeds, Stearns realized there was a niche in the industry that needed to be filled. Therefore, the highly-motivated Stearns revamped his venture to function on a much larger scale. He expanded the business to a full-time operation and hired a staff. Presently, High Mowing Seeds is the largest and one of the only organic seed companies in the country and retails nationwide.

According to Stearns, High Mowing Seeds plays a key role in the function of the Center for an Agricultural Economy by making many crucial connections with other lead organizations and hosting a number of food web gatherings. Stearns is also applying his ambition and dedication to his work with the Center.

Over the past six months, he has been helping the Center clarify its vision and scope. He has played an organizational role by submitting grant requests and hiring staff. With this accomplished, Stearns can focus on their larger goals.

"The organization is in a position to expand and deepen its food system rebuilding efforts and coordination in the greater Hardwick community," adds Stearns. This rebuilding effort is embodied by the

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Center's main projects, the Atkins Field project and the Agriculture Eco-Industrial Park. The Atkins Field project will involve the development of 15 acres of ideally-located land on the former site of the Woodbury Granite Company (known to Hardwick area residents as Atkins Field). The mission of the project will be to offer an incubator farm program, akin to Burlington's Intervale Center (its inspiration), and year-round farmers' markets.

The Agricultural Eco-Industrial Park project is a relatively novel concept, which originated with several food-based businesses wanting to relocate to a shared piece of land that they could co-lease with others, including new food processing companies. Vermont lacks proper food processing facilities, and this is perceived to be an obstacle in keeping much of the food produced in the state genuinely local, since much of it has to be shipped out of state to be processed. Currently, a feasibility study is underway to determine the logistics of the park project.

"These two projects are critical to helping build the base necessary for value-added agriculture to continue to grow and thrive in our area," says Stearns.

Indeed, the proof of the Center's success is its ability to make things happen. The Center has been successful in increasing people's access to good food. It also has forged positive connections among growers and those in the business who can create new markets to answer the evolving needs of a sustainable agricultural system. ↪

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