

Vermont New Farmer Network
Poultney, VT
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Transcription

Successes and challenges of being a beginning farmer: What have been the successes and what are the challenges. What has been toughest for you in being a beginning farmer? Why—what is behind that?

I think that there's an incredible number of mentors, very generous, experienced farmers who are extremely generous in their willingness to sit and chat with many of us and share their wisdom, hold our hands. I think we're really incredibly fortunate.

Tagging along with what she said, my husband and I, as soon as we started talking with people about wanting to be farming, Greg Cox offered us his land, free use of his equipment, his commercial kitchen—that's a pretty generous situation.

So receptiveness by folks to see farming succeed.

Yeah—just helpfulness, especially in terms of land...we've had lots of offers of being able to use people's land. It might not necessarily be a perfect situation for us, but to have those offers is pretty big thing to get.

Can I ask a quick clarifying question: are the landowners farming landowners?

An established certified organic farm of 30-some years.

I was just looking around the circle and there are six of us that just got done with the USDA course, Building a Sustainable Business. Since I've been in Vermont (I'm from North Carolina), the past 4 years my education has gone through the roof through NOFA, through RAFFL, through any number of things. I have a multiple-pages list of all the events and the resources meetings and it's one of the best in the nation, I'd say, Vermont, as far as leading the way in education and support.

So a strong network of support out there?

Yeah, I mean as far as, I've been to conferences in California and North Carolina over the past 10 years, and these are far and away, very extensive, the right kind of speakers, very helpful.

I think even just the whole Buy Local movement. People are starting to understand what it is to get your food from where you live, and how important it is to keep the business in our state and in our region. There are a lot of different organizations that have done a great job really pushing that, and getting people to understand what it is.

So creating demand?

Sure, yeah.

Yeah, there's a hungry public and they are looking for local products. That's a success and it's also a challenge, to keep growing that, to keep the momentum on that.

Stimulating demand?

Yeah, just keep it going. It has started, but there are still a lot of people out there who don't necessarily buy their food here who could.

Help move beyond the initial success to really bring more people to the local.

Yeah, I think it could cascade further.

Just to piggy-back on what he said, I think it's an intentional and deliberate building of the markets. I am a huge fan of RAFFL, and I think there has been very deliberate, intentional work to build that market. It's not just that we're riding on a wave—we are, certainly we're riding on a national or international wave—but we're not just riding on it, we're actively paddling, surfing, whatever. We're actively engaged. There is an organization in our Rutland area that's working very hard on that, successfully.

I find it hard to be both producer and marketer. I love the producing side of it, but I hate the phone calls, the delivery, the marketing side of it. Making it happen, I love, but getting it out the door is the part that's hard for me.

We can all agree that once you start eating locally you'll never go back to industrial food, so I think if we were to focus on education, supplying schools with local food, right out of high school these kids would be going for local food.

There is so much education out there, that is one of our successes too, because really as [the college professors] know, they're teaching agriculture here at the school, and they're starting to get it into the elementary schools, so these kids are going home and saying to their parents, we should buy a CSA share, or we should grow our own. That's been part of my success, is that is kind of how the word gets out about buying local food and I think the education process is a huge part of it, and a lot of it is being done; a lot more needs to be done. In Poultney in particular, too, because we have [Green Mountain] College, and they are now starting an agricultural major.

I have a challenge. I am working on pricing. This is something I talked about at the USDA class...how do you have time to be an accountant and to be a farmer. Up to about 3 years ago I was just a laborer, so I spent all my time learning how to grow things, which is an extensive practice in itself, but I didn't spend time being a business woman or an accountant. So now that time is taken up. A more narrow challenge is pricing, which has been outrageous for the past 2 years, trying to figure out. I can charge 25% of my cost...

I hear two things. One is the challenge of how to figure out how much to charge for your product, and the other one is skills related to the aspects of managing the business.

There are multiple challenges! I really want to focus on pricing. Because we are in Rutland County, I was thinking it would be great if we could all sit down together and say...yes, you can do your top-down pricing and figure out how much it takes to put into your product and how much you can get back to make a business work, but that's so extensive. We have to be competitive, I get that, but I have no idea, I honestly, with a few products, I just throw numbers out there.

It sounds like you're saying it's also the challenge of balancing the mastery of the production and at the same time moving from having gotten your production expertise down, and now moving into needing a whole range of business skills, particularly pricing.

In challenges is access to money. I think it is a big issue. I mean I know it's out there, and we had this class, 6 weeks of business planning and getting it all together, but it's a lot of work trying to get a couple of dollars.

To keep the market growing for people demanding local food, I would say a challenge is preconceived notions of local food being way more expensive, which isn't always necessarily the case. The farm we were working on this last year we were selling heads of lettuce for \$2.50, and we would go into the grocery store and check things and a lot of our prices were really competitive. The value that you're getting at the farmers market was certainly better, compared to the grocery store, because things are way fresher, and I would argue the food is better. Bring those preconceived notions...

You can broaden this one to the consumer and the preconceived notions of consumers around a whole range of things related to the product—it's more expensive, it's got bugs.

I think a challenge I have faced in the past is overcoming the economies of scale, trying to scale up to a certain degree, finding information about technologies that would make that easier.

Scaling up in terms of increasing production?

Increasing production, but I can also see, in terms of technology, ways of using technology to reduce your variable costs or something like that, decrease farm labor.

I've got a list of programs or organizations that have been really helpful and contributed to success for me. Growing Places, Building a Sustainable Business were two programs that were huge for helping set things up for success. As far as technical growing information goes, having an apprenticeship, the Vegetable and Berry Growers Association, and the winter NOFA conference have been huge helps and really big supports with technical knowledge about how to turn seed into fruit. Then to go back to the pricing and marketing, I just noticed recently there have been some webinars about that kind of thing, but there has not been a lot of organizational support for education around how to market or price. Specifically in relation to, there's all this great help out there for technical assistance with how to plan your business and how to grow things, but then I have felt like there has been a gap in OK, you've got all this stuff, you're running your business, now how do you sell your products efficiently and effectively?

I think it's a pretty good choice of work, because the nature of the work makes you healthy in terms of success, so it's easier to handle these challenges when you're outside and eating well and being healthy doing challenging work. The nature of the work...to some degree it's easier to be in a stressful work environment outdoors, eating well, versus being in a stressful work environment wherever else you might be. There's a therapeutic quality to the work. In Vermont, especially.

Small-scale meat processing, access to reliable processing that you can get into in a decent time frame. I would say also relating that to regulation, because we have a lot of customers who care about how animals are treated, and it's hard to say "as long as this animal was on the farm it was treated very well, I can describe to you all the conditions, I can't exactly tell you what happens once they leave." Rural Vermont is working on this, but we need more ability to process on the farm.

Slaughter price is just outrageous. How are we going to make a buck, when we have to by USDA regulations, have it go through this process, but yet the prices continue to go up because they can, because there are so few. I want to go into the slaughtering business. That's the avenue right now, you can make some serious dinero there.

I'm currently coordinating the Locally Grown Guide for RAFFL, and I would say that is a success, which started by RAFFL 5 years ago. It's a directory that provides free listings for farmers and I think now coordinating it, I've used it in the past as a consumer, but now coordinating it I'm seeing how this gives farmers a place to just write up a little description of their farm and let all these consumers see it, 40,000 copies of it go out. I'd say specifically this guide is a success in this area.

One of the obvious challenges is disease. I'm finding it out with bees, dealing with mites and things. It's kind of an ongoing thing. This past year in Vermont with the blight, having the resources to be able to get information. I have had the resources of the state beekeeper and a mentor who has gone through some of those things.

I think we lack the population density to serve what we're producing, particularly in the direct marketing manner. It's not easy to sell our product without thinking about wholesale or without thinking about some kind of consolidation to reach a bigger market.

I'm going to somewhat contradict that. What I'm concerned with are the meta-challenges, which is, do we have the ability to feed our population, and I think he is absolutely correct in terms of the people who want to buy it right now, but I think if we're looking at this from a bigger community societal, do we, can we feed ourselves? Can we feed our Vermont citizens, all of them? I don't think that we can do that with small-scale diversified vegetable or meat production. I don't think that's ever going to get us to the point of feeding all the schoolchildren in the state. It might get us to smaller schools, but it's not going to get us to all the schoolchildren in Rutland city schools, or all the people in our state. It seems to me the big challenge for the big thinkers is how do we produce...I don't want to see us becoming agribusiness in Vermont, so how do we keep what we value so much, the small scale, the knowing how your animals are raised, knowing how your carrots are raised, but really being able to feed the people, because I don't think we're succeeding. I think we're succeeding in feeding those who are seeking us out.

Then there's the challenge of how do we extend our growing season?

I'd say that's a success, too, season extension in Vermont. It's a challenge, and there's a lot of good season extension stuff happening.

Success too that's locally grown food source is the fact that it's a small population, because I don't see this anywhere else in the country to this degree. The farmers markets, big numbers going to the farmers markets, and in other areas I just don't see it. I think the lower population density helps. Having been the wholesale route, no thank you. You work a lot for not much.

How about the production side of things, challenges?

One of the biggest challenges we've had is finding land for a long-term situation, like purchasing land specifically, is really expensive where we are now. We have had more offers than we could deal with as far as leasing land goes, but there are usually some kind of stipulations on that, that have their inherent challenges too. So I think part of it as far as how this relates to production, is there are all these great practices that you can do, but you need to be somewhere for a very long time to do that, so the challenge becomes how much work do you put into land that you're going to leave, ultimately, or how do you find land you don't have to leave.

I think a big challenge is the fact that the small diversified farm in Vermont has such a small impact on the land and the economy compared to large-scale dairy or other farms in Vermont, so we don't get the resources devoted to us from the USDA and extension agency. It's harder to get the information that really impacts us. I know dairy farmers get benefits because of their size, not just from those government agencies, but like the feed dealers, they come around, they're always testing the feed, and they have consultants that come out and they adjust the feed ration, get the right kind of dairy feed. Organic farmers or vegetable farmers need people who come around and test your compost and test your soil, then they adjust it, and can tell us if macro or micronutrients are bunk or true science and we should be kind of worried about that, we need that kind of information. If we had that sort of support. The extension agents and the NRCS. The largest small farms are like 30 acres, whereas a dairy farm is typically like 1,000 acres. They have much more potential to damage the environment, so they get the bulk of the resources.

With the land thing, one of the challenges that we've had specifically is like rotation and infrastructure for what we're doing, we need dry barn space, we need land, so we've ended up doing a lot of driving and commuting to do a little side barn thing. That's been complex and difficult, and a lot of, we're looking at land options, that don't all come with barn space, so then you get into the financial challenge of how do you afford to do this in a way that's not going to get you completely underwater. Facilities side as well as the land, the equipment as well. We're starting from not having any of that stuff, and basically working off of other peoples' good will and assistance, and so then trying to put all that together is kind of overwhelming as far as the reality value of, ok, so we don't own land, we don't own equipment, we don't own this, and we have these ideas. How is that actually coming together?

One thing that I was thinking about, you asked about challenges to production. I worked for an engineer and land surveyor for while, and people buy a piece of land and they tend to put a house on the most well-drained piece of soil on the property. That's happening a lot around Vermont. Just to be able to put in a septic system out in the country, that's typically what happens. I think if we're trying to have more farmers around and trying to be able to feed ourselves that's a major problem, especially, you know, we've had a couple of really wet summers, and potentially that's what we should be expecting, so access to well-drained good ag soils.

Can I add something to that? Specifically what I've been running into is as a challenge competing with land developers for tillable land, and they've got a lot of money to just snatch up all of the, a lot of I think it's old farms, specifically in Addison County, anyway, I think a lot of the old farms were bought up and now people are sitting on them waiting to develop them. They're not available, or they've already been purchased by land developers.

They're not going to be sold at ag value.

Right, they're not going to be sold at ag value and they're not going to sell you 15 acres of that 100 acres without putting conditions that you can't farm there because they want to make a housing development.

And you might be a nuisance.

This is your opportunity to offer suggestions, ideas, on how to strengthen programs, as well as maybe you want to talk about assistance that has worked for you in the past. If you want to be specific, about specific agencies or organizations that you have worked with that would be really valuable. Specific programs that they have implemented that have helped you.

I have a couple things. One is participating in Growing Places, Women's Ag Network course, which I didn't actually participate in that much, but it was great, really helpful. The big question, which we've talked with [others] about...

[I did not notice that the tape had stopped...the following section in italics is from my notes rather than verbatim transcription.]

...unique collaborative efforts between farmers: think outside the box. I found Growing Places better than Building Sustainable Business course. The materials were great, although the online format wasn't that great as I didn't have good internet access at the time. The material was more holistic, the language was better. The Building Sustainable Business course instructors were not very encouraging.

I would like to thank the Vermont Department of Taxes! I found out by accident about farmers' exemptions from sales tax. I didn't know about off-road diesel, power bill, fertilizer, seed, building materials...there could be more education about it.

It is possible that our type of farming can be supported by help coming out to the farm OR a unified clearinghouse providing open-ended consulting, such as financing options,

from an independent source of information. There are plenty of products people can sell me if they would come out to the farm. Agronomy services, soil testing, outreach.

I've had issues with trying to get projects done. Finding out information on regulations, insurance, tax, loan information. Extension does some, will give places to call, but the information is highly dispersed.

In making the transition from a large garden to a small farm, we found stuff on the extension web sites, NOFA, RAFFL...

...we were trying to figure out our strategy, what we were going to do. I went on, I think it was the extension web sites, and found an awful lot of information. One thing I was looking up beans, and found a ___ article about beans, so I think that those sites help us achieve our success. I'm not computer savvy, but at least I can go on and get some of that information. I find that a big help. The other thing I wanted to mention is I noticed last week that we no longer have the Vermont Seal of Quality, because, I guess the Department of Agriculture wasn't funding any people to put the stamp on things. So maybe if we're talking about a local agricultural system even beyond raw products, into value added, that could include our raw products, I think that the Vermont Seal of Quality used to say an awful lot, and I think if it were to be brought back and to be strictly enforced, and it had some real guts to it, then maybe that would help build the foundation for all us small farmers trying to make a living.

Part of the year I work in New York, and that farm there, Cornell will send people out to the farm. One woman she came out every other week or maybe every week to scout bugs, she was looking for disease. Then she would always grab the farmer and walk through the fields and give him the survey. But mostly for her work, in terms of notifying other farmers. But that would have been a good opportunity to take when an extension agent comes to the farm, to grab some of the aspiring farmers. I think we had a crew of 13, and maybe half of them were aspiring farmers. If she would have grabbed a couple of us, and set it up with the farmer of course, we could walk his field with her and she could do some training. They also would send people out from Cornell, they were developing different pieces of equipment, and we would run some tests. They didn't work, but if there was that sort of thing coming from UVM, that might be different pieces of equipment that we could try that would solve some of the problems. He came out a couple of times, and if he would have grabbed some of the aspiring farmers, take our names down, put us on mailing lists. I think all the mailings from the support agencies actually go to the farmer, and the farm workers never get any of the latest information, latest updates, so we're kind of left out of the loop. I don't really know how the extension service works or what they could do. ... I think it's important to reach aspiring farmers at the farm.

I'm speaking more specifically for Rutland County, but a commercial processing unit would help with season extension and more income through value-added, less waste. I also have been thinking how great it would be to have a place where I could process my lard. I can do it at home, but I can only sell it moonlight-style. On a smaller scale, vegetables, on a larger scale meat processing, whatever. Also having it not be quite as

expensive as the Venture Center. As a small-scale institution I can't go up there and make a buck because it's like one step larger, but I still have enough product. There needs to be some middle level here. Even to hire him to create recipes or something like that is really expensive. Comparably it's great, I think it's great what's going on up there, but something for Rutland County.

Along those lines, also having help for the agricultural resources program for the Food Bank. A food hub or some place for, along the lines of thinking outside the box, having agriculture resources program side of the Food Bank having a huge stake in Rutland County, which is the most impoverished county in the state, with a large number of really fantastic farms, having some way to make money. Having a hub for distribution of product, like grow your extra row, some sort of center or hub.

Back to the resources, Cornell and UVM have cut back and cut back and they are going to continue to cut back. But I understand the vendors, it's pretty hard to go out to a small farm, thinking there's no money in it. But sponsoring, say having the extension service sponsor resource fairs three or four times a year. Make them bigger. You sort of get worn out. I love going to meetings, it's lots of fun, but it's a lot of work, and the busier you get, you can't take a day off from work to go to another class, another focus group, another meeting. The Vermont Fruit Grower's Association, *[I'm not certain I got the name of this association correct, so please check before distributing this as factual information, especially since it is negative]* that was like the worst trade show in the world, like three people there, like cut me a break. They all have a little agenda, no competition, you have one chemical salesman and one insurance person in the state, and that was it. From what I heard the Berry Growers? Small fruit growers? I heard theirs was great. You can't go to all of them. NOFA has good ones. Getting it so we can go a couple times a year and see a lot of people who have a lot to offer. Equipment salesmen...

So you like resource fairs, you just want to make sure if you're going to have them, make them worth your while.

Think of all the folks who said "I like growing, and I don't like marketing." I tend to see a lot of that. People are good at growing and don't like the marketing. I would love to see more funding for organizations that help people market. I'd love to see the state pay for marketers. I mean, we do have the Locally Grown Guide, NOFA does a great job helping advertise CSAs and other sources, the Grass Growers Association. Going the next step and really having people be there who are out beating the doors saying "What do you want for local food? Hey, I actually know somebody 3 miles over who's looking to sell that. I'll make that connection for you." Like pit traders down in the stock exchange making those calls for us. I can picture several things...it would basically be a state-funded or non-profit funded, like Black River Produce but not necessarily that big. Somebody whose shingle is out that says, "If you're looking for local ag products, contact me; if you're looking to sell, contact me." They play their role of the middle person, but either the consumer or the farmer is paying the cut.

Like maybe going to restaurants and saying "do you need some locally grown lettuce, these are the vendors to buy it from."

There are lots of efforts out there. RAFFL, one of the great things they coordinated was the hospital getting CSA shares dropped off there, so three farmers developed a good number of CSA shares. That kind of really pushing it so the folks that do want to just focus on growing, because I think that is a barrier. To be honest, looking at the numbers of some of the more successful vegetables farmers, some really look like their vegetable operation is subsidized by their marketing skills. In other words, they're making a pretty good living, and yes they're growing great vegetables, but if they were growing those great vegetables and selling them wholesale they wouldn't be making a living. Even though if they didn't have to focus on marketing they would have more time to focus on growing. The bottom line is they're really good marketers, and because they're good marketers and they kind of have an in with their own vegetable growing they're making a good living. But really it's the marketing that's making them the living, even though they're fantastic growers. I don't have solid data on that, but when you look at the growers who are really doing well and are successful it's hard to say they're not fantastic marketers.

I was going to say another RAFFL thing, the New Farmer Initiative through RAFFL, has been really helpful. It's a new program that RAFFL has some funding for, to organize things like this, this resource fair, and mixers. I had a question about liability insurance, so I sent an e-mail to [RAFFL staff] and she wrote back with a whole bunch of resources. So I would say specifically this regional new farmer initiative is helpful. Something to build more success, I would say something like Food Works up in Montpelier, which is where I served as an Americorp member at Food Works at Two Rivers Center in Montpelier. They've got a lot of food education programs, specifically working with low-income people to teach them how to use raw products and to help them learn how to use their Food Stamps to buy those products, etc. Also the Farm-to-Table program, which works with area farms to get their produce to schools and hospitals and institutions and is subsidized through grants, so the schools are paying 50% of the wholesale price to get Vermont apples and things like that.

They're like the hub of a wheel, a connector. They're finding those markets and they're providing avenues for the farmers to sell those products in new places.

I think more of those connectors, it's one person who's paid maybe \$25,000 or \$30,000 a year, but they are creating a huge service; they were moving \$90,000 worth of produce when I was there a couple years ago.

I'm hopeful that approaching agriculture from an economic development authority viewpoint, I've seen a little bit of progress there in Middlebury, specifically to get ...crop money into economic development origin so you can get some expertise on starting a marketing co-op, or a brand for beef, say, so that I don't produce enough to expand my market that way, but there are probably six of us who grow on my road who need a better market than what we have. My markets are great, but my neighbors sell to auction. They have quality beef. So with an economic development authority where they have more business expertise or more ...by creating these organizations to develop marketing co-op, a little bit of assistance creating a brand, but because it's involved in agriculture it's potentially grant-worthy. So some of this, the person who can consult with us on marketing or consult with us on creating a brand also has... A regional planning office, or

some other kind of...not like the Chamber of Commerce, it's a little more. Because they'll see us as a small business, they'll see us as a marketing label and a product. I'm optimistic and hopeful that that is happening. It seems like it's a little bit new, but it's happening. We talked about doing an egg co-op in Middlebury. We talked about beef co-ops a little bit. Then on the other side, like ____ was saying, so then once we have our grass label or whatever, we have a broker that helps us, like a meat co-op.

What you're saying is more effort to look at agricultural economic development, for the economic development infrastructure that's there to bring agriculture in with what they're serving.

Yeah, because it seems like someone in that kind of non-profit sector, they will have easier access to basically agricultural funds because they have a better handle on all of that than I do. I have no idea how to go about starting a meat co-op.

I have a tangible example. Saturday I hooked up with three other farms, I drive down to Boston, I have a freezer van. So I have no idea, I've worked up my costs for what it takes for my labor and the van, and they just send me their prices, but I'm losing money trying to, because people like a multifaceted product, so I'm offering veal, lamb, beef outside of my farm which is pork, but that's exactly what I want. I want to know how to make it work, because I don't know how to make it work and I'm not going to be able to do it anymore. Collaboration.

I think there's a lot of potential for the middle person, because it's just a matter of time for those people to catch up with us, but likewise we want to be ... like a cooperative.

Again, the meta-thing of can we really feed larger and larger amounts of people. Nobody wants to sell wholesale; nobody wants to sell at lower than market prices because the intensity of the work that we do...perhaps if we did, those folks outside the fishbowl could help us figure out a way in which the farmer was not responsible for all of the marketing and the pricing and all...that decreases the amount and intensity of the labor, and it's often the labor that many of us don't like to do, which then might allow us to grow more and sell it at prices that would be more accessible for the general public. I find that ...

The other thing I'm thinking is that when you said you're really glad to be here because you didn't really know that much Rutland, this area, I find that I hear that over and over. I've only been a Vermonter for 5 years and I'm definitely a newbie, but there is definitely the great divide in our state, right? And I think that it's interesting to think about all that's available down in Rutland County, all that's available in the state and how Rutland County can be well supported in that way. I don't want to get into, that's where all the defensiveness is going to come in, I'm not going to say there's not a lot of services and supports down here, but I'm just going to leave it like that. Let me just say one other thing...the other thing I think that we need, that I think can be thought of in a bigger way, is the school piece. I appreciate what you're saying, that we've got to get into the schools to build our market and we've got to get into our schools for the health of our children, too. There are so many hoops that schools are, so many barriers to making this happen on a large scale. I would think that there could be some significant supports from state agencies and what have you to decrease the barriers to really really achieve the goal of

good, fresh, healthy local foods in our schools, not just in the schools where it's worth going to make it happen, or an incredible principal, but in our larger schools, our economically challenged schools. I think that's where our agencies and our supports, UVM, and all those type of things could definitely get us in those schools.

A little feedback on what you said, with the apple industry, none of that's free, and we pay, and we pay, and we pay, and now we're paying even more, so you kind of want to go there with caution. If we could encourage legislators to loosen up on regulations. On one level they're going, yeah this is a great idea, and on another level they're making it damned near impossible to grow anything.

Is there a specific regulation?

Nothing specific, it's generally. To me it's just like general stuff out there that's less than friendly for business farmers.

So more conducive business environment for farmers.

Up and coming possible issue is something that I think would be better to address now rather than after the problem, is specifically around laws, is how to do that balance of food safety and small-scale production. Like GAPS [Good Agricultural Practices] is getting talked about a lot now, and people are trying to figure out fees. So having some say in it for the small beginning farmers up front rather than in 2 years we all have to change the system we've spent a while building...it's more about food-borne illness because of pathogens, and dealing with that, so there's legislation being worked up about how do we limit food-borne illness, but it's more written for very large-scale producers outside of the state, but it's still going to affect all of us. From what I've seen, nobody really knows how, nobody really knows what's going on with it exactly, so I think being proactive about having a say in that.

So this is national regulations, or state?

National, but it's hard to divorce national from state.

So making sure your voice is at the table when these things are being decided.

The last section is feedback from the service providers. You get to ask questions of the farmers. You get to ask them, propose ideas that you might have to address some of the issues that they might have raised. Or clarification questions.

I would pose the question out of respect, but I wonder in the Rutland region in particular if we may not be headed toward a heaviness on the retail end in direct-to-consumer marketing, and if whether we also need to be having more discussions about folks who are from markets maybe not at the wholesale level, but for example to institutions. It means developing a different sense of markets, it means developing a different sense of production, everything changes a little bit. Maybe there's some middle ground between the direct marketing and the wholesale piece. The question is, are the farmers strategizing for those other options. I wouldn't be surprised if maybe we're pushing the bounds a little bit toward a glut in direct marketers in the region. Maybe not, I hope not, but I'm not so sure.

Are they exploring beyond retail into wholesale markets?

I don't know if I want to use the wholesale word, but other markets that are not direct to consumer, i.e. direct to families.

Anyone want to respond to that?

I would love that...I mean, I'm frustrated and overwhelmed by the responsibility of marketing, going one to one to one to one. I know that other industries have gotten in trouble with their middle men, but I would be happy to aggregate with other beef farmers to use a middle man to get to the institutional sales and reduce the burden of the one-to-one contact. I would love that. I don't want to particularly have to start that, but I would be happy to join it if it offered itself.

If you were to be looking to explore those larger markets, who would you look to to help you set up that relationship? Would it be regional organizations, like RAFFL, would you want one of the kind of specific industry councils, the Beef Association or the Vegetable and Berry Growers Association? Who can you see serving that role or helping bring more people to the table?

One of the thoughts I had this morning was that I might leave today with an eager intern from the marketing department at Green Mountain College who would like to intern and sell my beef next fall. In some ways, go to the experts outside our circle and bring the expertise that they're developing in another room to us. They're probably just as eager for new markets and new opportunities as we are for getting it out. It doesn't have to be within our own universe, but just exposing each of us to the other would be very helpful. **Or it could be an intern working at RAFFL working on behalf of ____.**

[*can't make out comment*] ...what I like about the CSA where you're doing it to an institution is that you'll be able to get me a pretty good set amount...so you would just say, "yeah I need 30 pounds of spinach for 5 months." That's great because that's like a production goal, and I know that your price is going to be better than____. But I think that those kinds of things are working really well, they're just a few years old and I think they're doing great.

For point of clarification, you mean a multi-farm CSA, where someone like RAFFL is aggregating different products?

Yes, an aggregated CSA.

You called it an industrial CSA?

Yeah, because right now they're going to hospitals, workplaces, where a lot of people work.

Just to follow up on ____, if anybody doesn't know about what's happening at the Intervale Center, the Intervale Food Hub project, you can go to the Intervale's web site intervale.org and find some information about the Food Hub there, and also through Northeast SARE, our final report for the project is listed. There is a bunch of information, consumer and demand research that we did, and also research we did with producers, mostly in the northwestern part of the state, but I think that research would be relevant for you guys as well. People can e-mail me to get access

to that, mandy@intervale.org. The Food Hub, this is only the third season, is a multi-farm CSA with 20 drop-off sites in the Burlington area, and this year it's also going to have a brokerage component selling direct to restaurants. There are 21 farmers in the collaborative. It's farmer-driven, but right now it falls under the umbrella of the Intervale Center. One of the future goals for the project is to have a farmer ownership component to it, so that's something that we're working on as part of the Regional Food Centers initiative, working with RAFFL as well. This information about how we did it is totally available and shareable. I think that particularly with meat there's a lot of interest in Chittenden County for restaurant sales of consolidated meat. We have a great working relationship with RAFFL so it would be through them. Even something like, at the latest NOFA Vermont conference there was a panel on regional food centers, but would it interest people to have a panel of Chittenden County food hub farmers and you could go and talk to them or something like that. Or maybe we could have an open house or something and they could come and learn, or we could meet you somewhere and learn one-on-one farmer-to-farmer about how that collaborative marketing project is going.

Are people interested in this idea, of food hub concept, to be hearing from farmers who are already participating?

A couple of comments...*[can't understand comment]* my other comment is that humans selling to humans that the real value in what we produce is really the relationship that we have with the consumer, and that's where the greatest value is. It's not the potato or even the steak or the pork chop, it's really the relationship. We have to figure out how to do this collaborative piece, this new system, without losing that real value, that relationship. So my challenge is for all of us to figure out how to do it. The other thing is that one of the successes in Vermont is that a lot of the service providers are also farmers. I'm a farmer...

Inside knowledge.

I just want to offer in response to a couple of comments about access to land is that the Land Link program is being kick-started again, region-related, it will be more sophisticated. I think it's supposed launch, might be by fall. Others in the room may know more than I do, but it will really be a new and improved opportunity for seekers of land. There are a variety of tenure options I think.

I'd like to follow up with a couple of comments about the idea of can we feed ourselves, which is something I'm really interested in too, and I think that if we were to consider that as a vision, there's a lot of labor markets that can be developed around that. I've had some conversations lately with people from state government, Department of Labor, Department of Corrections, Agency of Human Services. There's a need, and it's dire, for people to talk about agricultural jobs for Vermonters, but how do we connect and educate the people who need the jobs with people who want the employees? I think that's certainly one area, and I've got some

ideas about that. Then, needless to say, if we were able to feed ourselves, the health benefits would be extreme, actually particularly with the current problems with obesity, juvenile diabetes, etc. So the health benefits are one thing that we could begin to include in looking for funding and grant-writing, project development, things like that, and then land usage. Obviously we'd have to find land, continue to keep land available for growing food instead of growing houses. One quick comment about co-ops, which is not my area of expertise at all, but it would seem to me that in a circle like this some kind of a strong grassroots movement to create the kind of co-ops or systems that you would want and need for resource clearinghouse somebody was talking about, some kind of a resource clearinghouse, "how do I know which product is best for me to buy." And then the marketing clearinghouse. Marketing is very expensive stuff and so if those are the things that we need to promote local foods, then perhaps this idea of grassroots co-ops bubbling up from underneath what you need or else, as some of the other producers know, then you end up just working with a great huge business.

Two or three comments...earlier someone mentioned the services that some of the larger farms get, and one of the specific items that was brought up was testing of compost. I'm wondering if Cindy could help us: do the conservation districts do compost testing? I was thinking Nancy McGuire in the Rutland district has done a lot of work with a couple of different farms that take food waste for the Rutland area. Another is that, this was years ago, I have a coworker, Diane Heleba, she is with her husband on the Heleba potato farm and was at the farmers markets. Years ago she took a special course that was a 1- or 2-day workshop where maybe Vermont Fruit and Berry or someone like that brought in a trainer to teach a workshop on marketing and setting up your display area, and she found that extremely helpful. I'm wondering if one of the service provider organizations or UVM could do something like that again.

NOFA Vermont and the Women's Agricultural Network are collaborating to do a marketing course that will be held in the fall. I'm working on that with Wendy Sue Harper and others, and one of the things that I'm hearing today is we really need to look at pricing as a component. What you said today is going to affect what we offer.

The other comment is, what about Vermont Quality Meats for people who are in the meat industry and needing to get assistance there with marketing with any of the meat products. Are they an option?

They're in business. It was a cooperative that divested and was sold to an individual, single proprietor.

Several of you talked about wanting help with getting to some information or learning how to financial packages, products, insurance products, understanding. I'm curious, do you want to learn how to evaluate those different options that are out there, or are you really looking for someone to tell you which one, to work one-on-one with you to make a decision?

[*Can't make out comment...*]

So you want someone to do like the Consumer Report thing for you: this one does this, this one does that, but you don't feel like you need to learn more about different financial terms, what those terms mean?

That would be helpful too! Both/and.

Terminology of tax things, financial things is very obscure.

Would you take time to go someplace to learn it? Or would you want that to be available to you when you decided...would you like a workshop that would give you the background, or do you want to just read about it online, or order the brochure just in time. Would you ever make time to learn it?

I would make time to learn it and I was just thinking of this course, Building a Sustainable Business, there were quite a few terms in there, basic financial terms, that I really had no idea what it meant. I would say really starting on a basic level for people who have not studied anything financial, maybe in college, and are just going into farming and need the very basics. I would go somewhere to learn it in class.

I would definitely go somewhere to learn bookkeeping and accounting for farmers, Quicken for farmers...

I just want to know, you mentioned land tenure, land access, there are some of us working on land access and portability issues, and I'm just wondering what would be helpful, just on a very basic level.

Cheap land!

Within my power! We're looking at all different kinds of things, like equity-building leases, and tax breaks, and education for non-farming landowners, and things like that, and also databases and lists of landowners and ways of securing long-term tenure and lease agreements. What do you need?

I need very basic information about land ownership. Like I said about the financial stuff, starting from scratch. You can get a college degree and not learn anything about that kind of stuff. And some thought put into people who are never going to be making any money and have maybe \$15,000 or more of college debt, and how ever you would be able to afford a mortgage.

It's kind of what they had in the old Land Links that then ended. It's just having a basis to ____, having lists of who has land available and what they want for it, like whether leases or straight sales or whatever. I think added to that, though, would be there's a lot of—the average age of farmers in Vermont is 65, there are a lot of retiring farmers, there's tons of open land, unless those farmers are enrolled in a program then nobody really knows them, so they actually go out and knock on doors and say, “Hey, you guys have 3,000 acres, you're retired, what are you going to do with it?” At this point you can go to the Town Clerk's office and look up land records to find out who owns the land, and then I don't know how to approach someone from that point. “Well, I've been kind of stalking you at the Town Clerk's office...” I think from a landowner's perspective they'd be more comfortable if it were an organization and that's what their job was, as opposed to someone who's been going through the records.

I'm a stalker, so I should probably answer. I'm a land stalker. I'm interested from this group, I was pretty surprised to hear how little the whole access to land thing came up. It came up a couple times, but I thought it was going to be a big deal. Clearly there are a lot of other really big deals here that may be much more pressing. Partly it might be because this group is going to be a group that is already on land somewhere, so this is not going to be a group that can't find land to farm on, because you're all farming. My question here is, are people finding that land is...there are two things about land turning over. One is being there when land turns over and having an opportunity, and the other is whether or not land is turning over at all. I'm wondering if you guys are actually missing parcels that are turning over, or if it's just not turning over. The Land Trust and other organizations are really making a big effort to try to help farmers to make land affordable, but we don't get that many calls. We get some calls, Greg Cox was wonderful, and that stretched a lot of systems because it was just a small parcel but we were able to work with him. I wonder how many people here are finding pieces of land turning over that they actually can't get.

I think that land tenure is a very big creativity piece that can govern your success as a farmer. You totally have to think out of the box. There are a lot of different opportunities, and you arrange them, that's a great start, but it's all the other things you have to arrange.

I think my wife and I have given up on actually ever owning land right off and then starting a farm. Without a down payment, without an established business, it doesn't seem possible at all to buy land to start a farm. You're better off pursuing other options.

We're sort of in the same boat, and we're finding that there's land out there for leasing, for renting, for buying. It's more what makes the most sense cost/benefit-wise, and what those long-term logistics and protections, and that's where it's difficult. And then the cost is also big, especially for owning something, and especially given that you're going into a business that is uncertain what you're going to actually be able to earn from it, so then you start thinking in terms of what other work am I going to be doing, and how are we going to piece it together. Leasing seems like the best deal at this point in a lot of ways.

This is a response going back to the first thing that came up, sales institutions. I remembered that NOFA has a program like that. NOFA has apprenticeship with Shelburne Farms and Food Works at Two Rivers and Vermont FEED, Vermont Farm To School program, and if folks are interested in selling to schools or to other institutions, Abby Nelson is in our office and she is rabid (I mean that in a good way) about farms to institutions. She's one person out there who has a lot of experience with setting that up.