Good afternoon and thanks for joining us; I'm Judy Simpson. It's no secret that the past decade has seen a growth and demand for local foods. Farmers and producers have some time struggled to meet the demand partly because the interest rupture for Storage Processing Marketing and distribution has been playing catch up. That's where food hubs come in. Farmers and food processors across the state now have access to local food hub including the newest food hub which came on line last fall. Rebekah Gollin tells us more.

Mad River Food Hub P Script

Jacob Finsen has a unique skill set. He’ll butcher your pig, and then he’ll help you make it into sausage. And then he’ll help you brand, market, and even distribute the sausage, all according to the food safety plan he helped you write. (nats, cutting meat) And that’s not even taking into consideration the many federal regulations regarding food processing that he’ll advise you on along the way. It’s all in a day’s work for Finsen, who is the facility and operations manager, and in-house butcher, at the Mad River Food Hub in Waitsfield.

Jacob Finsen/Mad River Food Hub: “In Vermont we have a lot of high quality local foods, but they're limited in their capabilities to process these foods, farmers, and business owners, and having a place like this saves them that massive capital outlay to build and license their own facility. We've already built it, we've already got the equipment, and you know, we've already done all of the stress work.”

Robin Morris/ Mad River Food Hub: “Mad River Food Hub is doing 3 things, we're doing processing, we're doing storage and we're doing distribution.”

Robin Morris began developing the idea in 2009, researching existing food hubs, talking to farmers and developing a business model.

Morris: “Some farmers were having challenges with how they could be sustainable, and it was very clear that if we had value-added food produce available to them where they could get more money for their produce, that would make them more sustainable.”

Morris wanted the food hub to help small businesses be successful, but he also needed to make sure the food hub itself was a successful business. …But there was a problem with the initial plans.

Morris: “We started looking at vegetables and fruits and could not find a way of making it financially viable.”
So Morris and his partners went back to the drawing board…

Morris: “… then we added meat into the equation, and the moment we added meat into the equation, it became financially viable.”

And so, when the Mad River Food hub opened their doors in October of 2011, it became one of the only facilities in the country offering both meat and vegetable processing. It was an immediate hit with farmers and food producers in the area, operating at 30% of its capacity in its first quarter – which was not only winter – it was also only a few months after many local farmers lost their crops to tropical storm Irene. Having a facility like this available can make all the difference for a small producer.

Joe Buley/Screaming Ridge Farms & Joe's Soups: “I couldn't package soup and try and sell it to a grocery store or another third intermediary party. I couldn't wholesale the product.”

Joe Buley is a farmer. He’s also a chef. He uses his own produce for salsa, pesto and other sauces, and his biggest seller – soup. But until recently, his options for selling his products were limited.

Buley: “Without a state or a USDA certified facility the only meat based soup I could make would be at the church kitchen in bulk and that it had to strictly be for ready to eat, I had to serve it hot at the farmers market, people had to effectively eat it there on the spot.”

About 80% of what Buley is producing is staying local for now, but with the addition of USDA certified meat inspection at the food hub and a certified food safety plan for his business, Buley will soon be able to sell his chicken soup in Boston and other markets.

Buley: “The business is growing, very rapidly; I'm having trouble trying to keep up with it actually.”

Buley is already thinking about the next steps for his young business.

Buley: “Not only utilize all of my product and have a higher yield for my farm, but when I surpass that, I’m now going to create a market and start buying in more product from other small growers.”

Other producers are also seeing the benefits of using the food hub - streamlining the time it takes to prepare food products can leave more time for other aspects of starting a business.

Joe Bossen/ Vermont Bean Crafters: “We've gone from the on-farm kitchen to the food hub and in the course of that are now at a point where we can produce in one single day of production what it would take us basically 5 full days of production to do.”

Joe Bossen of Vermont Bean Crafters in Waitsfield had tried working out of several different places when he heard about the food hub.

Bossen: “Once I saw how they were structuring the appliances, the equipment inside, the fee rates and everything, it was the 1st time I saw a business model that was actually catered towards the interests of the small producers.”

Spending less time making food means Bossen can take time to make the connections that will keep his business growing.
Bossen: “We have this will to bring more nutritious, more tasteful, healthful products into the institutional marketplaces you know, hospitals being one, schools being another…”

Here at Burlington High School, Bossen is hosting a Falafel Festival, introducing students to some of the bean and plant based food his company specializes in. It’s a partnership that is the culmination of months of planning.

Bossen: “It’s the result of probably better than a year worth of started conversations that happened through Vermont fresh network's matchmaker event”

It’s a unique collaboration where Bossen is able to take some of the bulk commodity beans that the school gets for free, and repurpose them into something more appealing to the students.

Bossen: “Basically, we get beans given to us; we combine those beans with locally grown root vegetables, culinary herbs as they're seasonally available, locally pressed oils, things like that. and we're able to kick them back to the schools, within their budgets.”

The event is clearly a success.

Sarah Heusner/ Burlington School Food Project: “If you come to our high school or any of our cafeterias, your mind is blown because… the cliché school lunch is not at play there; it’s something totally different,”

Heusner is the Farm to School coordinator for the Burlington school food project, which aims to get local food into Burlington schools while educating students about healthy choices.

Heusner: “So a lot of it starts with our relationships that we've kind of established with local area farmers… we bridge these partnerships with them over the summer, we purchase product from them, and then we process the product - blanch broccoli, if you will, and freeze it, so that when the kids come back to school they actually have a local product that they can eat.”

Along with sourcing local food for the school districts, the project also wants students and schools to grow their own. At Burlington High School, a new greenhouse will provide some produce for next year’s lunches.

Sarah Heusner: “We've talked to Joe about growing kale for him in our school gardens this summer and then having him incorporate it into a black bean crumble that he's making for us – it’s going to go into a lot of our dishes - lasagnas, taco casseroles, things like that…”

Bossen: “In a state with 600,000ish people, all those people eat 3 times a day. It’s a really powerful thing to think about what that translates to in terms of economics and being self-sufficient and things like that. There's a huge economy, even in a small state like Vermont, when you think about the amount of bites of food that happen on a daily basis, and a lot of those bites of food happen in institutional settings, like these public schools.”

Heusner hopes that some of the food grown in the greenhouse will itself be processed in a food hub. It won’t produce enough to feed all of the students, but it will help.

Heusner: “We serve so many meals a day, so we need a lot of product, and we don’t have a lot of $$ because we are a school district, and we're school lunch.”

Back at the food hub, producers like Buley are hard at work, and more are signing up all the time.
Morris: “There's lots of products that people can make that we haven’t even thought about yet, and that's part of the adventure…”

Finsen: “It’s a dream that I am willing to invest myself in 100%…”

An investment into a dream that is already paying off. In Waitsfield, I’m Rebecca Gollin with ATF.

Thanks Rebecca. Joining me now is Hans Estrin. Hans is a local Food Network coordinator with UVM extension based in Brattleboro. Thanks for being with us. Rebecca story focused on the new hub in Waitsfield but can you give us an overview of the different hubs in Vermont?

Hans.: Sure Judy. It's a really exciting time to be working on local food in the state right now. Mad river food hub is unique but all over the state there are a merging food hubs. They cover the state. You wouldn't necessarily call them officially food hubs they are emerging. Their moving food. They're either moving food now or in the next couple years or next year they're starting to move foods. Right across the bottom of the state Bennington is starting up a pilot. We have Windham farm in Food Network. There's a market starting in Key New Hampshire across the middle of the state acorn raffle upper valley are looking into the market with inter veil that's been there for a while we're mad river in Central Vermont we also have two Rivers it's been there for a while. Saint J. Alpha with food venture center as well up in that area and the whole green mountain farm to school direct is in the northeast kingdom.

Judy.: How do Vermont hubs compare two hubs nationally?

Hans.: They're very different in many ways. The much smaller their rural. Order of magnitude as a last possible market. To give you an example Philadelphia common market and urban market they're going to have 2 to 3,000,000 dollars of sales within a 30 mile radius. The same thing in this area looking at 1/4 million. So order of magnitude is less. Overall misstate food hubs are dropping the bucket right now compared to the commodity market. We have maybe $200,000,000 of sales and food hubs in less than 200 food hubs. So $1,000,000 average is what they're making. The definition is that it's a physical the USDA definition of physical place foods coming in its being aggregated it's being packed is being RE shipped is being added valued and it's going out. That's sort of the definition. However April just last month USDA came out with the food hub guide which are evaluates that definition. It's no longer physical structure and its mission driven and it's a regional so there's been a shift during the Obama Administration towards a wider concept.

Judy.: So the goal of the food hub goes beyond just helping the farm processor?

Hans.: Absolutely so Vermont is in a place where we're taking and looking at food access. We really need to get to that. Me to help and increase food access for lower income people especially in a rural area. So we need to burst the bubble when we're thinking about this local Food System and building it. Vermont slightly on the side of direct sales in Vermont have more than doubled in the past few years. At the same time we're still a drop the bucket less than a couple percent. Farm the plate wants to increase to 10% by 2012 we have a little time to do that. In 10 years excuse me not 2012. We have little time to do that so we need to think out of the box we to burst into not just direct markets but the bigger wholesale and small wholesale markets. Food access for lower income. We need to create new markets as well and part of creating new markets for farmers and food processors is working directly in communities with farm to school educating kids two expect and want and no the taste of fresh local food. That is a long-term marketing technique let’s say a generational. In 10 years those kids are going to be out wanting this product. They’re going to want to
see it in the Retail Stores in Hannaford’s and price chopper. That's a real port and peas that Vermont Food hubs can offer. That's working towards Vermont self-sufficiency on the whole

Judy.: How does UVM extension food and all this?

Hans.: To burst this bubble as they say these food hubs these food hubs are really exciting because they are actually providing and building ramping up this local wholesale preserving the farmer and farmer’s identity. Keeping food and money within communities. At the same time we really need if the bigger local distributors. Black river produce upper valley produce. If we're going to burst this bubble and start moving a lot of food we need to look to those people who know how to move a lot of food they been doing it a longtime. So extension when we're thinking about these are merging economically viable mission driven food hubs we can help promote those within communities. Their sort of the last mile distribution. And somehow start moving these products statewide. Do I have time for example?

Judy.: Yes.

Hans.: I direct example I will say coming from or I worked closely Windham. Paul Harlow Westminster organics just a couple of grants to do processing at his farm. He's going to be producing carrot coins and other products that could go statewide. He's doing it for the institution in Southern Vermont at the same time crowd after this meeting I'm going to meet with Sodexho at UVM and we're looking into how to get that same product up to UVM directly. A direct relationship between the farmers and Sodexho you have this local working on developing supporting farms and then working with Black River and Sodexho to move the product statewide, and create a market. That's an example of how extension can help I think.

Judy.: Hans thank you so much for joining us today it's exciting time to be in this particular venture.

Hans.: Thank you very much Judy.

Judy.: That's our program for today I'm Judy Simpson we will see you again next time on Across the Fence.

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