Abstract
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The majority of U.S. hop production is concentrated in the Pacific Northwest. Increasing consolidation in the brewing industry has led to the two largest beer producers in the US influencing quantity, price and strains of hops produced nationally, making sourcing difficult for craft brewers. Driven by concern about supply, and a nationally growing need for organically grown hops, the USDA began funding hops research in 2009 at four national universities, including the University of Vermont, to develop regionally diverse methods of production. As a result, hop production in the Northeast has grown over the last five years, as both existing producers and new home brewers-turned-weekend-warriors have begun to cultivate these crops. As this regional growth continues, infrastructure issues resulting in quality inconsistencies and problems in farmer-to-brewer distribution have arisen in the local market. Rather than working with an existing group of farmers producing a known commodity, the hops initiative in the Northeast is simultaneously trying to cultivate producers, markets, and support infrastructure. These efforts are complicated by the up to four-year time lag between planting and optimal harvest and the $15,000 dollar per acre substantial capital investment farmers must make. Using the Agriculture of the Middle and value chain analysis framework this research examines: 1) how the social relationships between farmers and craft brewers creates economic and community development opportunities based on hops production, 2) how the biophysical and economic constraints of growing hops challenge the ability to create a values based supply chain with a consistently high quality product.