

John S. Rodgers and John F. Rodgers Vermont Farmers Hemp Company

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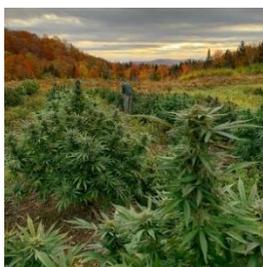
Father and son John S. and John F. Rodgers started Vermont Farmers Hemp Company in 2017, but farming was not new to the Rodgers family. John S. grew up on the farm on Rodgers Road in West Glover, helping the family run their dairy that had been in the family for five generations, beginning in the early 1800's. Eventually the Rodgers family decided to retire from dairy farming and sold the farm. While John S. worked other jobs, including 8 years each in the Vermont State Senate and House, John F. went to school for engineering. They dreamed of returning to the old family farmstead and reuniting with the land for which they care so deeply. With the legalization of growing hemp in Vermont in 2014, they saw an opportunity to buy back the old family farm with a business plan based on the new market for Vermont grown hemp and hemp products. After initially leasing the land and farm buildings, the Rodgers purchased the 500-acre farm in 2019.

Their first year farming hemp was a small scale experiment with just 12 plants to test both growing hemp and the market for it. That first year they had a good crop. This allowed them to select seeds from the healthiest plants to germinate for the following year. Using their own seed stock from year one, the second year they expanded to 1500 plants. The Rodgers' self-selected variety of hemp grew very well on the farm with very high levels of CBD. The following year, 2019, they expanded again, up to 8,000 plants. This time they used purchased seed that was known to grow hemp that tested under the mandated limits for THC.



At that point, the market for hemp in Vermont became highly saturated as many farmers saw potential for profit. This "green rush" resulted in farmers having

difficulty finding processors. Many farms filled all available storage space with dried cannabis and awaited processing for many months. Much hemp never got sold because of statewide oversupply. However, the Rodgers got through the dynamic market by reducing the number of plants grown annually to about 3000 for 2022, focusing on minimizing costs, and making their own line of



CBD and CBG hemp products for humans and pets. Brenda Rodgers keeps the business organized and efficient doing bookkeeping, shipping, and ensuring the farm has extra labor as needed.

With the price for hemp biomass dropping from an initial high of about \$100 a pound, down to \$25 a pound, and now resting at \$1 a pound, the family needed to find ways to generate more income. The Rodgers diversified their farm operation in 2020 by opening a bed and breakfast but were then forced to close due to the corona virus pandemic. They have since reopened to farm stays and are looking to expand the spaces they offer for vacation rentals. Additionally, they host farm tours and hayrides and see growing opportunities for agritourism on their beautiful hills that overlook long ridgelines of the Green Mountains. Fields that are not cultivated for hemp or for their home garden bring in revenue



through rental to a hay farmer. The extensive woods create income through selective forestry and provide lumber for on-farm building projects. John F. and Kristen Rodgers recently purchased the established Vermont food business “12K Granola,” making and selling healthful



cereal in their commercial kitchen in which they make their edible hemp products. Like many small farms in Vermont, multiple members of the Rodgers Family work full-time jobs off-farm for additional income necessary to supplement the farm revenue.

John S. and John F. Rodgers see several significant risks in farming while working hard to create resiliency. One of the biggest challenges has been the volatile market for hemp, both in Vermont and globally. Prices crashed initially because of local overproduction, and now remain low because of an abundance of hemp production both domestically and abroad by major producers in places like China. Also, some of the biggest processor/buyers in the region control enough of the market in buying hemp



from farmers and then processing it that they have substantial power in dictating a low purchase price from the growers. Additionally, the Rodgers feel financially squeezed by high land taxes. They are not currently generating enough income from agriculture to be considered farmers. The family deals with these financial challenges by working off-farm for more income and advocating for more farmer-friendly state tax codes. The

Rodgers get the greatest profit margins from their sales by focusing most of their marketing efforts in their own online store, some fairs and craft shows, with a small amount also sold wholesale.



A major production challenge for the farm is the humid climate of Vermont, and with climate change the region has already gotten much wetter. Cannabis is sensitive to moisture, which can cause several devastating fungal diseases. The Rodgers use organic growing practices to grow healthy, disease resistant plants, and crop rotation to reduce the fungal load in the soil. In 2018 they experienced an infestation of aphids and were able to keep their plants safe from harm by releasing ladybugs and placing 40,000 Green Lacewing eggs on the crop to predate the aphids. The family also purchases insurance that protects harvested plants against loss while they are hanging in the barn for curing and storage. The Rodgers steward their land to foster a vital and resilient natural system, providing ecosystem services for the broader community in the forms of clean water, diverse plants and animals,

and insect-driven pollination. They believe in growing and creating their products with the least possible impact, which means outdoor cultivation using the sun rather than an energy intensive greenhouse. Using ecological methods is good for the farm and the earth.



John S. and John F. also note that their strong social relationships help them through both word-of-mouth marketing and in learning innovative ways to improve their operation. For example, the Rodgers learned from a nearby farmer to repurpose a temperature-controlled tobacco drying chamber to quickly and carefully dry whole plants, reducing the vast amount of barn space they need to use for much slower natural dry curing. They also rented out space in the dryer to other nearby hemp farmers.

Having made it through the first several years of commercial hemp cultivation in Vermont which forced many other producers out of the market, the Rodgers see a vibrant future ahead, with hemp as just one of their diverse farm products and services. They hope to increase the farm’s profitability and work less off-farm as they become more established. 2022 is the first year in Vermont for legally growing and processing “adult use” THC cannabis, and the family is optimistic about applying their success as hemp farmers in this new cannabis market. The Rodgers hope to earn a much higher price per pound for THC-rich flower and products than is possible with hemp. The Rodgers look forward to welcoming many more visitors to their expanding offerings of on-farm stays and experiences. Aligned with both their care for the land and profitability, the family is working to designate parts of the farm as conserved from development under a land trust agreement which would reduce their tax burden. With high-quality hemp products and on-farm experiences, the Rodgers hope to “get people back out in nature, because they need it now more than ever.”



Photos courtesy of the Rodgers family and J. Taylor



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