



# Farmers and Food Access Research Brief

## The Center for Sustainable Agriculture

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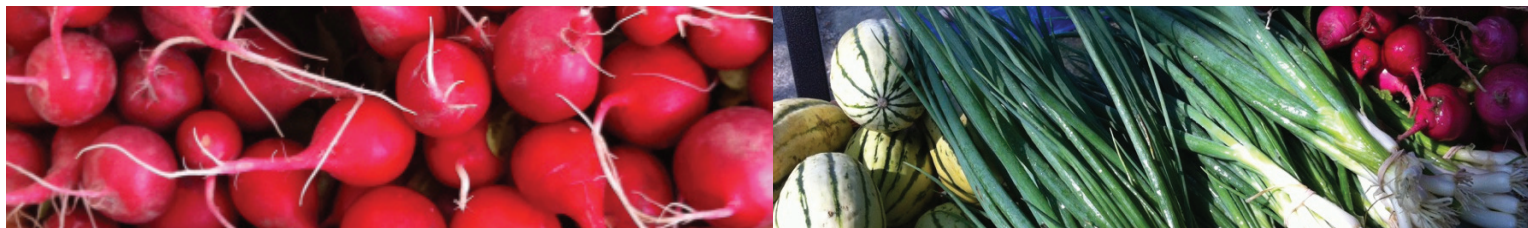
By Rachel Schattman, Local Food Program Coordinator

Hunger and food insecurity are on the rise. The USDA recently released a report indicating that 13.6% of Vermonters are food insecure (up from 9.6% in 2004-2006) and 6.2% are hungry (“very low food security”) compared to the national averages of 13.5% food insecure and 5.2% hungry. (Nord, M., Coleman-Jensen, A., Andrews, M., Carlson, S., 2010) Farmers are uniquely positioned to have a large impact on the health and wellbeing of their neighbors. According to the Center for Disease Control and Prevention, if low income consumers have access to fresh fruits and vegetables, the consumption of these foods increases. This deceptively simple factor has a positive impact on the health of these consumers, and can contribute to increased food security.

However, it is important that farmers’ efforts to make food available and combat food insecurity do not have negative effects on their own economic viability. There is often great financial risk associated with agriculture and the challenges that Vermont farmers face in achieving business viability are significant. In 2011, we conducted interviews with 12 Vermont farmers. Farmers included in the study provide local food to low income Vermonters through a wide array of activities including sale, donation, or other means. The reasons farmers to engage in anti-hunger activities are largely related to their concern for the wellbeing of the community. Most (11 out of 12) interviewees articulated community health in some way either through their mission statement or in the course of the interview. The majority of the farms (10 out of 12) were owned and operated by more than one person. While farm values may be shared among many farm operators or decision makers, often the role of coordinating anti-hunger efforts belonged to a single person.

Farmers had different opinions about how anti-hunger efforts impacted the financial viability of their businesses. 7 out of 12 farmers stated that they were satisfied with how their efforts were going. Some of these even voiced that they wished to expand their efforts. Most participants who sold food to low income customers, either through direct sales or through contracts with public or charitable organizations, said that they believed these sales positively impacted their financial bottom line. Not all farmers that participated in the study were confident that their anti-hunger strategies contributed in a positive way to the financial solvency of their farm. One participant noted that their farm loses money on selling meat to local schools, the primary way in which they try to address food insecurity.

- △ Food insecurity and hunger are on the rise in the United States and in Vermont.
- △ Farmers address hunger in their communities through individual as well as programmatic means.
- △ Some approaches used by farmers to address hunger are charitable in nature. Some approaches generate income for the farm.
- △ Service providers should counsel farmers on how to meet social justice goals in ways that do not compromise the economic viability of the farm.



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When asked what kept them from providing low income Vermonters with more food, farmers identified three barriers: (1) personal time constraints and program inefficiencies, (2) consumer perceptions of local food, and (3) the price of local food versus the price of commodity food. When asked what the greatest opportunities are for improving low income access to local food, farmers had a broad range of responses: from increasing charitable donations to decreasing charitable donations, from cultivating institutional contracts to cutting down on the diversity of crops grown.

The table below shows the variety of approaches used by farmers in this study. It is obvious that no one farmer uses only one strategy, and that many use a combination of approaches. These bundled approaches can potentially reinforce each other and lead to greater success in both farm financial success and contribution to the community. It is also possible that taking on too many strategies can jeopardize the financial security of a farm business. The “right mix” depends on the farm, their stage of development, and the community context in which they operate.

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**Table 1: Anti-hunger strategies employed by farmers**

Farmers	Income Generating										Charitable Donation			
	Subsidized CSA share	Sliding scale pricing	Keep pricing “reasonable”	Work trade opportunities	Payment plans	Accept EBT cards	Accept F2F	Sell to food bank/schools	Sell at a discounted price	Offset cost (lost leaders)	Host gleaning projects	Donations	Grow an extra row	Pay staff to do community service
A	■		■	■							■	■		■
B								■				■		
C	■	■	■	■		■	■			■				
D	■					■	■		■		■	■		
E	■			■				■				■		
F	■	■		■		■		■		■				
G	■	■	■									■	■	
H						■					■	■		
I	■				■	■	■				■	■		
J											■	■		
K				■			■	■		■	■	■		
L	■	■	■			■		■			■	■		