

**Focus Group on needs of Beginning Farmers**  
**March 27, 2009**  
**Center for an Agricultural Economy, Hardwick**

## **1. Looking ahead 5 years, what does success look like to you?**

- Maintaining quality of life
- Achieving revenue goals
- Self-sufficiency from outside inputs
- See progress from increasing production
- A decent customer base with legal basis for them to purchase (raw milk, on-farm slaughter, etc)
- Less stress, learning to deal with stress
- Get enough customers to increase production
- Pay workers well
- Maintain passion for life-long learning
- Attract & maintain good workers
- Feel supported at all levels (economic, government, providers) with high communication
- Public highly educated on ag issues
- Time for family, recreation, other activities
- Provide food for everyone who wants to buy it
- Looking forward to another 5 years

## **2. Successes and Challenges of being a new farmer**

### **Successes**

- Providers have come a long way toward servicing small businesses
- Ability to buy conserved land
- Balance of off-farm income enables access to land, helps prevent burnout
- So many people and orgs that help (i.e. community of farmers at the Intervale)
- Creative land ownership
- NRCS/Bruce Chappell, soil mapping
- North Country Farm Network
- Shared equipment and training
- Vermont Farm Viability Program – helps focus businesses, connect with experts, marketing assistance
- Amazing amount of help available
- WAgN workshops
- Diversification enhances farm
- Holistic business modeling
- **Models that work:** Hoop house tomatoes, Grass-based rotational grazing, farmer-to-farmer info exchange, CSA, grain growing, peer learning
- **Orgs that help:** VFN, Foodworks, Intervale Food Basket, NRCS, NOFA, Rural Vermont, VT Pasture Network

### **Challenges**

- Have to watch out for over-regulation
- Navigating available resources
- Affordable land

- Navigating/ identifying potential markets
- Slaughterhouse access/ cost
- No infrastructure to deal with small ruminants
- Regional access to slaughterhouses
- State could be more proactive in marketing VT meat
- Regulations will result in fewer meat producers
- Infrastructure issues for grain production
- Cold storage
- Need to think about ability for communities to feed themselves
- Difficult to coordinate marketing vegetables and livestock
- Daunting regulations for livestock
- Need for high-quality labor and being able to pay decent wage
- Challenge of seasonal employment
- USDA paperwork
- Challenging FSA paperwork
- Identifying where to get started with VLT
- New farmers not eligible for some programs
- Having specific program for new farmers would be helpful
- Not enough info for startups
- Lenders put lots of money into a few farmers with equity instead of smaller amounts of money to new farmers
- Need financing model for smaller operators and startups without equity
- How to slowly build equity
- Realistic sense of expenses and revenues – know what you're getting into

### **3. What assistance is needed?**

- Intervale incubator program is a great model
- Mobile processing for animals bigger than chickens and money to get it off the ground
- Hire another Vern Grubinger/Ann Hazelrigg
- Don't cut funding to Extension
- Deregulation of farmers (on-farm slaughtering – inspectors could test facilities like they check bulk tanks for dairy farmers)
- Food safety concerns may result in one-size-fits all national regulation
- Need an advocacy group for beginning and small farms
- Use Farm Bill listening sessions as a way to shape policy
- Landowner/ farmer incentive program – tax relief for landowners who allow ag use
- Farm caretaking service “labor link”
- Renewable energy discussion focuses on methane digesters which are not appropriate for small farms
- Ombudsman to help navigate opportunities and programs
- Appropriate technology
- Expand Farm Viability Program to include follow-up
- Farm mentoring
- Education and workshops about regulation
- Hands-on education, on-farm access to providers instead of workshops (old Extension/NRCS model)

- Winter welding and engine repair workshops
- Farmers need to remember to take time for mentoring
- On-farm housing for workers

#### **State level**

- Expand Buy Local campaign to conventional markets
- Educate public about true cost of food
- “Farmers Keep Vermont Green”
- Farm-to-school – educate kids about ag
- Increase funding to help institutions buy local
- Policymakers need to understand economic impact of small farms
- Support VT FEED – public schools don’t have the funding for food programs
- Teach how to sell product to chefs/ institutions (professional dress, labeling, presentation)
- Collaborative marketing, clustering, distribution
- Farmers market barrier – FMs generally don’t allow collaborative marketing
- Focus on online presence

## **4. Service providers questions and comments**

**Violet Q:** People don’t realize that farming is a viable career. What inspired you to get in to farming?

- Was restaurant owner/chef with family dairy farming background
- Volunteered on farm in grad school
- Grandparents farmed
- Needed a job, ended up on veg farm

**Q:** What is the utility for different types of shared storage?

- Would like to have cellar to age small amount of cheese
- Community storage
- Minimal processing facilities for second-quality produce (sauce, storage, etc.)
- Washing and packaging should stay on farm
- Commercial kitchen

**Q:** Where are you on a market continuum?

- Market is wide open and we have a CSA waiting list, but things might get tighter in this economy
- In Burlington demand is higher than the supply, but this is not true in other parts of the state “I have to work for every customer”
- Competition is a two-way street – consumers want choice
- Lots of demand for grain

**Q:** What type of business planning do you want (encouragement or reality check)?

- Always push them to run the numbers
- Be brutal

**Q:** Clarify what you meant about state doing more about Vermont meat.

- Focus on beef and lamb, emphasis on Vermont market

**Comment:** No ag lenders here today. Lending is based on appraisals, lending practices make land transfer difficult

- VLT system is good for selling land at ag value

**Q:** What are the market dynamics? Why not sell out of state?

- +/- 6 participants sell wholesale; 1 sells out of state (organic milk)
- Local demand is enough
- Vermont has an unfair advantage – educated clientel who seek local products

**Q:** Has anyone explored income potential of commercial compost production?

- Don't have space
- Issues of quality control, economics of trucking in carbon
- Any farmer who knows the value of compost won't sell it – need to keep it on farm

**Q:** What success have you had in community lending?

- (Tom Stearns – High Mowing Seeds): “Slow Money” allows people to contribute small amounts to create larger pots. Small investors aren't prepared to do due diligence on investment opportunities.
- How to set up?
- L3C potential

**Q:** What support do you need to allow time for mentoring and peer-to-peer learning?

- I put energy into mentoring workers
- Winter is more feasible
- Need some kind of return, consulting basis
- Networks, discussion groups are useful
- 25 ag-based biz owners and farmers in Hardwick have formed successful peer group, share employees, lending – 5 hours/month commitment
- Use of Internet, Facebook as peer-to-peer tool
- Being creative with how we coordinate

**Q:** Would you like to have one-on-one assistance to help navigate resources, learning plans and referrals?

- Yes

**Comment:** Discussion around assistance has focused on how to get answers, not on production-related challenges.

- There are plenty of services out there to help with production
- There is a lot of technical assistance online
- Technical assistance is still needed, but the focus/frustration is on the cultural side

**Comment:** As farm population ages, is there a type of “reverse mortgage” so older farmers get to stay on land with a lower payment for farmers?

- More like rent-to-own, but need special arrangements to keep separate
- Size of farms have to match what new farmers want
- Growth of non-farming landowners

**Comment:** Philosophical question about land ownership and embedded development. How do farmers feel about improving and working land that they don't own?

- Long-term lease is key; need guarantee
- Soil building is such a key thing
- Kathy Rulf of Land For Good /NESAWG did a speed dating for landowners and farmers