

Vermont New Farmer Network
Westminster, VT
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Chart Notes

What is success? How will you know when you have achieved it?

- When I'm happy.
- When I have money in the bank, can pay bills and make a profit. Financial viability and stability.
- When I can be a full-time farmer.
- When I have the capacity to donate food.
- When I own my land.
- When I feel stable, have a supportive environment, don't feel threatened.
- When I know my customers—local market.
- When I have respect from the community for what I do—positive name recognition and appreciation.
- When there is an increase in the amount of locally grown and locally consumed food; when there is a change in the economic structure.
- When there is a healthy community, an increase in environmental quality and social community.
- When I can provide jobs.
- When I am able to build a modern dairy facility that is environmentally responsible.
- When I have a “cushion” to allow room for growth, and I have resource options.
- When there is more local interdependence and fewer imports of inputs.
- When I have increased time for other activities, like family and recreation.
- When there is less dependence on grant sources and more local autonomy and stability, a local cooperative system of support.

What have been your successes and challenges as a new farmer?

Successes:

- Experience on other farms with internships and apprenticeships.
- The advice of other farmers, holding my hand.
- A helping hand from other farmers concerning equipment and land.
- Collaborative and cooperative relationships.
- CSA (relationships), support of the community with people coming to the farm; also money.
- USDA, NRCS/CE, EQIP; but it took 5 years.
- Extension service, Vern Grubinger, farm visits, advice on production and pests, New England Vegetable and Berry Growers seminar.
- FVE (Farm Viability Enhancement)—having a real business plan; speaks the language of lenders and business.

- “Tilling the Soil” course, business planning, need to revise business plan.
- Extension agents on the farm.
- Farmers market: farmer-to-farmer, loyal customer support.
- Winter farmers’ markets, more direct markets.
- Willing workers showing up, people interested in farmer.

Challenges:

- When you can’t get workers, money for labor.
- Scale—VLT (Vermont Land Trust) likes big farms. Cost of land in southeast Vermont. Farms here are smaller.
- Local tanning options for sheep farmers.
- Conundrum of needing established operation, proven business plan to get access to capital/credit.
- Federal legislation being considered re: regulation, food safety, is threat to small farms.
- Finding the balance between “mind your own business” and advocacy, being involved.
- Wholesale purchaser practices (anticipated) that put requirements on growers (inspectors, washing).
- Where is the small farmer’s voice in it all?
- Workers’ compensation costs for labor (solution: grants to cover)
- Minimum wage rules.
- Current use issue (solution: more exceptions for small farms)
- Land ownership: If you want to own land, you need to quit farming to get a job to get money for land.
- Frustration that despite interest in keeping farms, outreach. Future of Vermont farmers can’t get on farms.
- Development threatening agricultural resource base.
- Social challenge: reaching out to and connecting with the next generation (schools, organizations).
- Changing the view/attitudes about farms and farmers.
- Shift from commodity mindset to other markets, production approaches.
- Dealing with “entrenched dairy mindset.”
- Finding quality compost for establishing raised beds.
- Finding scale-appropriate resources.
- Finding people to help fix equipment.
- Slaughter facility/options.

Assistance: What would be helpful?

- Low-interest micro-loans: \$300 to \$2000 for equipment.
- One-on-one business planning, technical assistance. FVE Mike Leehan (sp?), Greenfield MA, Working Landscapes.
- More SARE (Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education).
- Working with universities, untapped resources—research, students, internships, practicums.
- Micro-grants: local, less paperwork, for tractor, greenhouse, production costs.

- Grants for farm operators, not landowners.
- Model: NOFA farmers' markets mini-grant program.
- Foster trade/education from Europe, places where local agriculture has been successful. Learn about other models that have worked.
- Increase support to make local food more affordable, accessible, encourage use. Examples: coupons for CSAs, EBT at farmers market.
- Get more people to market.
- Address perceived and real difference in price.
- Education so people know how to use food.
- Education to enhance awareness of local food options.
- Land Link—addresses need, but needed more money. Need recruiting of both sides. Advance planning outreach, going to landowner.
- More creative/collaborative approaches (small incubators).
- Scale—allowing for different scale operations.
- Tax breaks for transitioning land into agriculture (more active use).
- Individual initiative to connect with landowners.
- Rebalance NRCS with more technical assistance, less money for “stuff.”
- Holistic management education/course, soils, financials, way of life.

Feedback/questions from service providers

Q: Incubator farms? Good idea? Room-in model? Co-housing model?

- Yes, but need to be careful.
- Great idea. Residency is issue.

Q: Any thoughts about who should do it? How to do it?

- What about the “hatch” –is there going to be land available at an affordable price?

Q: Lease model—long-term tenure, Land Trust.

- Could work for enterprises that don't require large capital investment.
- Concern about equity in long term.
- Can you get secure affordable land, and housing on the land?
- What makes land unaffordable is people want to make money off the land.

Q: What can we do to facilitate farmer-to-farmer connections (formal or informal)?

- Learn best by working with a “senior” farmer.
- Conversation good, but time is an issue.
- Workshops/twilight meetings.
- Mentoring sounds good, if people are paid.
- Organize event on farm—gets people together.
- More organization is good.
- The challenge is access: who are the resources? Who do you ask?
- Web/blog.
- SBA model—retired farmers helping (volunteer or paid).
- Listserves are great.
- Conferences, doing round tables, opportunity to share.
- Post oil—“no farmer left behind.”

- Bring tools, photos, share what they are doing.
- Equipment share or rental of things used infrequently. If so, geography? How far? Maintenance, repair?

Q: What is the best learning situation?

- Consider time of year, on farm, on site.
- No one right way—depends on the topic.
- Formal/informal—ideal is combination.
- How to empower us to use tools, connect, set things up so they are user-friendly.
- Keep thinking about access, how to diversify access.
- Conservation districts: getting back to roots of farmer guidance.

Q: What about custom work? Wouldn't it be a possible need/opportunity?

Barriers?

- Opposite to goals of farm—looking for self-sufficiency.
- Timing issue. Preference for independence, access to equipment when you want it.
- Need flexibility. Also challenge to sharing equipment.

Q: Financial mentor?

- QuickBooks.
- Accountant.

Q: How to protect more smaller land parcels?

- Mission shift from long-term perspective—whether to get as much land as possible or to get more into agricultural use, more agricultural businesses?
- Financial barriers—smaller parcels cost more per acre.
- Have heard the concern about smaller parcels before.
- Difficult to accomplish.
- Funding sources are not there—this is the key barrier.
- Land Link services are important—missing that.
- Stewardship endowment.
- Want full portfolio.
- Interest in land quality.

Q: How easy is it to access service providers?

- Easy to find providers, but they haven't always been able to help.
- More challenging to find capital.
- When help looks for people it makes a big difference: “Some of us need to be found.”
- NH-Monadnock, both for farms and community.
- When/where do you get it? (e.g., New Farmer Network Resource Guide).

Q: What is the best way to advertise?

- Craigs List/Agriview
- Through associations.
- Feedback loops—successes and failures and why.
- Farm visits.