

Final  
Performance Report  
for  
Specialty Crop Block Grant Agreement 12-25-G-0577  
between the  
Vermont Agency of Agriculture  
and the  
U.S.D.A. Agricultural Marketing Service



Submitted by the  
Vermont Agency of Agriculture  
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In 2007, the Vermont Agency of Agriculture received funding for activities in support of developing markets for our specialty crops. The following pages summarize accomplishments under our major projects:

- Improvements to Online Marketing
- Seasonal Publications – *Vermont Harvest*
- Vegetable and Berry Growers' Education
- Mobile Quick Freeze Unit
- Vermont Grape & Wine Council
- Harvest New England Activities
- Apple Marketing

The activities conducted under this grant were managed by Steve Justis at the Vermont Agency of Agriculture. Following Steve Justis' recent retirement, Helen Labun Jordan has taken over administration of these funds.

## **IMPROVEMENTS TO ONLINE MARKETING**

### Project Summary

The Vermont Agency of Agriculture is dedicated to providing access to as many markets as possible for our specialty crop producers. One key tool for any producer to reach prospective markets is through an online presence. This tool is particularly important for Vermont specialty crop producers as they expand the range of venues through which their products are offered, from enticing visitors to Pick Your Own establishments, to fulfilling online orders for maple specialties, to regional Buy Local online directories. Several areas remain underdeveloped in Vermont producers' access to online marketing. This project focuses on two areas – access to online databases for *all* producers (independent of membership in a trade association or other organization) and business-to-business online communications.

### Project Approach

The Vermont Agency of Agriculture addressed the first goal of developing a broad platform for farmers to post their information through investing in improvements to the state's site. The particular areas targeted in these improvements were:

- Posting a database of direct sales for local foods – including farmers' markets, Community Supported Agriculture, farmstands, and Pick Your Own operations.
- Creating and posting databases for particular specialty crops – Apples, Christmas Trees, Maple Syrup. These crops can all be promoted during times of year that are slow for the farmers' markets and farmstands.

The Vermont Agency of Agriculture also made improvements to management of the website's front page, providing a constantly updated highlight of the farm season and local activities with links to relevant databases.

The Vermont Agency of Agriculture began local business-to-business online support with a grant to the Vermont Fresh Network for website improvements. The Vermont Fresh

Network (VFN) is Vermont's leading non-profit organization to promote local farm sales to commercial buyers, through farmer-chef partnerships.

VFN added a "special" or "urgent" market listing to allow farm members to post short term or special foodstuff availability. This feature provides an online method for addressing needs of from farmers with a very short term volume of product they would like to offer. Farmers may also use it to announce the availability of a new product. VFN also added a "needs" listing for chefs to list products they are seeking. This feature gives chefs the ability to post products and volumes they are unable to find. Farmers may be able to develop a partnership or be made aware of underserved markets or unavailable products.

The two, improved websites appear at:

Vermont Agency of Agriculture:

<http://www.vermontagriculture.com/>

Vermont Fresh Network:

[www.vermontfresh.net](http://www.vermontfresh.net)

#### Goals and Outcomes Achieved

The Vermont Agency of Agriculture observed a clear, significant trend upwards in consumers seeking information from its website. A nearly five-fold increase in web traffic occurred between fall 2006 (prior to making improvements) and fall 2009; monthly page views increased from 20,000 to 98,000. A redesigned website allowed for effective use of print advertising and article placements that drove consumers to the [www.vermontagriculture.com](http://www.vermontagriculture.com) home page and, from there, to specific crop listings. However, as Lessons Learned will illustrate, a much more significant overhaul to the website is needed, as the current approach is too cumbersome to manage sustainably.

The Vermont Fresh Network exchanges did not result in the same level of instant high traffic as the Agency of Agriculture website changes. Although the new web components function technically and respond to the points of need identified by VFN members, those successes have not translated into high usage. See the Lessons Learned section for proposed solutions.

#### Beneficiaries

The beneficiaries of the Agency of Agriculture website changes are all specialty crop producers, with a particular advantage to those who do not have membership in an organization with an online listing (or with a poorly publicized online listing) and the maple syrup, Christmas Tree, and apple producers.

There are a total of 65 Christmas tree growers listed, 123 Maple Syrup producers, 36 orchards in the Apples section and 25 orchards in the Pick Your Own Apples section, and 72 farmers' markets and 119 farmstands representing a range of specialty crops.

The Vermont Fresh Network project benefits any specialty crop producer interested in accessing the restaurant or food services market. The Vermont Fresh Network has 120 farmer members.

### Lessons Learned

The Vermont Agency of Agriculture website improvements, while they did receive an immediately positive consumer response, are limited by larger structural problems with the site. Particular challenges include:

- Limited staff resources for seeking out producers and inputting information into databases
- No mechanism to allow producers to self-update in databases.
- No mechanism to allow combined updates for other directories that include similar content, for example the farmers' market information that is shared with NOFA-VT
- No content management system that allows marketing officers or public information officers to update news items on the front page, which limits the timeliness of press release & advertising campaign tie-ins.
- A site that requires a general improvement in user friendliness

In 2009, the Vermont Agency of Agriculture began a plan for a more substantial website improvement, with an expected completion in late 2010.

See also Lessons Learned for the *Vermont Harvest* on research planned to better understand how producers and consumers utilize different media for advertising.

The Vermont Fresh Network had the opposite challenges. While the back end, technical side of their website functioned perfectly, web traffic was low. VFN has reviewed the issue and reached three conclusions:

1. It is cumbersome to post information; the password protection is not user-friendly and is prohibitive to instantly serving the user, thus creating a barrier to posting information.
2. The listing is embedded too deep for quick viewing. A chef or farmer cannot instantly access the hases and needs exchange location, they must travel through a password protection and 3 pages in order to access the exchange.
3. Marketing and outreach of the new feature has not been adequate. The website user manual explains numerous components, and the "Haves and Needs" feature is not prominent. The function of the exchange requires its own outreach.

At the time of this report, VFN had moved the link and started work on the password issue and marketing system.

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## **SEASONAL PUBLICATIONS – VERMONT HARVEST**

### Project Summary

The Vermont Agency of Agriculture, non-profit organizations across the state, and individual producers have been building the framework for helping consumers interested in local foods to connect with local farmers. This ability to link consumers seeking local foods with producers interested in expanding their markets is improving every year, although work remains. However, an important complement is a strategy for reaching new customers who may not have considered their Vermont food options. The *Vermont Harvest* publication is one way to reach these consumers, through broad distribution of an educational piece that informs Vermonters and visitors to Vermont of their options for accessing local foods as well as recipes and tips for using these ingredients.

### Project Approach

The Vermont Agency of Agriculture designed and published a four color, 16 page brochure featuring seasonal Vermont products. The two issues funded under the first Specialty Crop allocation were released for fall and the holidays. These issues featured:

- Cranberries
- Christmas trees
- Maple Syrup
- Apples
- Wine and Spirits
- Beer
- Pumpkins
- Honey

Vermont Agency of Agriculture communications specialist Kelly Loftus took the lead in developing these materials, with graphic design assistance from Tim Newcomb Studios.

The primary distribution mechanism was as an insert in the Burlington Free Press, Seven Days and Rutland Herald newspapers (reaching approximately 160,000 households) as well as through distribution in the Vermont State Welcome Centers.

### Goals and Outcomes Achieved

The distribution mechanism for the *Vermont Harvest* ensured that it was made available to a broad audience. The Vermont Agency of Agriculture performed a preliminary study of whether this broad consumer exposure helped Vermont specialty crop producers' business through surveying producers featured in the insert. The survey was distributed to 195 businesses with 86 returned, for a return rate of 44%.

When asked whether the *Vermont Harvest* helped increase their business, 39 respondents said yes, 6 said no, and 40 did not know.

When asked whether the Vermont Agency of Agriculture should continue publishing *Vermont Harvest*, 70 said yes, 4 said no and 11 didn't know.

The majority of respondents also offered a general comment in the "recommendations" section. Themes included working more closely with regional organizations that publicize local foods, increasing work on agricultural tourism, tying in more closely with the web, continuing to provide recipes and information on how to use local ingredients, and increasing the statewide coverage.

The Vermont Agency of Agriculture also worked with the Center for Rural Studies to perform a telephone survey of a representative sample of Vermonters as part of the 2008 Vermonter Poll. This survey found that the greatest source of information for learning about food items was print advertising, which supported the use of the printed Harvest insert. The second most popular source of learning about new foods was in-store demonstrations, followed by TV advertising.

The same survey found that access / availability was tied with cost as the number one perceived barrier to sourcing local foods. Again, the *Vermont Harvest*, by placing local foods in the public eye throughout the seasons can help overcome perceptions of inaccessibility. Cost may be a future target area for work.

### Beneficiaries

This project promoted specialty crops in general and was designed to benefit all Vermont specialty crop producers.

Specific crops targeted in the editions covered by this grant included Christmas trees (255 farms), apple orchards (310), wine & spirits producers (21), pumpkin growers (259) and maple sugar makers (1,310).

### Lessons Learned

The *Vermont Harvest* is a new publication, and therefore the data collected provided only a baseline. From the initial data, however, we learned that more research needs to be done in the following areas:

- Survey of existing regional local foods publications and their coverage (an initial listing from 2008 is available at:  
<http://www.vermontagriculture.com/buylocal/links/local.html>)
- Where groups publishing these directories would most like to receive assistance
- Methods that specialty crop producers use to reach consumers, including how they use the regional directories listed above
- Where specialty crop producers believe the most help is needed (for example, statewide publications, regional publications, web, print, TV, radio, etc.)

- Understanding how consumers use the web for accessing food information (for example, do they use the VT Agency of Agriculture site as a portal? Local non-profit organizations? Websites taken from other media, like print advertising?)
- Understanding in more detail what consumers mean by “availability” as a barrier to accessing local foods.
- Understanding where consumers need the most help in recipes / how to use local products.

Plans are currently in place to perform this follow up research in 2009 – 2010 and incorporate it into future consumer education campaigns.

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## **EDUCATION FOR VEGETABLE AND BERRY GROWERS**

### Project Summary

The Vermont Vegetable and Berry Growers’ Association (VVBGA) is a longstanding association dedicated to assisting members across the state. These farmers tend to be among the most progressive in Vermont, often tending smaller farms where experimentation with new production methods and new products is the norm. For this reason, their Association must provide a diverse range of learning opportunities. These funds went towards a series of workshops and speakers in 2008.

### Project Approach

The first project investment was in the Annual Meeting of the VVBGA and the educational programs presented there to 110 growers. Topics included:

- Tour of Innovative Vegetable and Berry Farms 2008
- Farm Bill Projects on Vermont Vegetable Farms
- Insect Habitat on Vermont Vegetable Farms
- Soil Nematode Survey of Vermont Vegetable Farms
- Strawberry Variety Trials, 2003-2008 in Maine
- Growing Sudax for Strawberry Mulch

The presentations are all available online at :

<http://www.uvm.edu/vtvegandberry/VVBGAMeeting2009Presentations.html>

In addition to these presentations, VVBGA led on-farm workshops focused on greenhouse tomatoes, vegetable soil fertility management, and beginning farmer skills. Seven workshops took place over the course of the grant and about 100 farmers attended.

VVBGA partnered with the Northeast Organic Farmers Association (NOFA-VT) to offer four on-farm energy workshops. These were held at Riverberry Farm in Fairfax, Cedar

Circle Farm in E. Thetford, Champlain Orchards in Shoreham and Cate Farm in Plainfield. Topics covered included using a corn furnace for greenhouse heat, making on-farm biodiesel, solar PV on the farm and electric efficiency on the farm. About 120 people attended in total.

#### Goals and Outcomes Achieved

The funding for educational activities succeeded in:

- Educating over 150 different growers.
- Addressing a variety of relevant topics.
- Presenting educational opportunities at different times of the year and in different regions of the state.

A survey conducted at the VVBGA annual meeting received a 45% return rate. Of those responding, 80% said they got information that will enhance their farm's profitability; 78% said they got information that will enhance their farm's management; 96% said they found out about a new practice, product, or service; and 78% said they will do at least one thing new or different next season as a result of attending the meeting.

#### Beneficiaries

Vermont vegetable and berry growers benefited from this activity. Participation and satisfaction measurements appear in the preceding sections. The Vermont Vegetable and Berry Growers' Association estimates that 150 different farms participated in at least one of the sessions.

#### Lessons Learned

Several of the projects pursued through Specialty Crops Block Grants in this and other rounds deal with educational outreach to producers in different formats – whether it is annual speakers, workshops, printed newsletters, electronic newsletters, website development or informational brochures / manuals. In the future it will be important to look for more opportunities to collaborate, such as VVBGA and NOFA-VT did on the energy workshops, and share best practices in communicating with farmers.

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## MOBILE QUICK FREEZE UNIT

### Project Summary

In 2007, the Vermont Agency of Agriculture received funding to build a mobile quick freeze unit. The purpose of this unit was to freeze berries quickly and evenly so they would be suitable for use in high quality specialty foods. The overall goal of the project was to increase the supply of Vermont berries for Vermont specialty products through guaranteeing producers a way to process their harvest. The Specialty Crop Block Grant component of the project went towards a business study to identify interested growers.

### Project Approach

Louise Calderwood, an agricultural business consultant, performed phone and in-person interviews with growers around the state. Although the freezing unit was designed for berries, she also interviewed other produce growers who might use the unit in conjunction with a commercial kitchen for preparatory steps (such as blanching).

At the end of the contract period, 30 producers had responded to a telephone-based survey. Interest in the unit was moderate. Some common obstacles listed included:

- Lack of appropriate electrical connection for unit.
- Products that would require blanching and no space for processing.
- Needs satisfied with current freezer space.
- Lack of labor to pick berries for markets other than the more lucrative direct sales of fresh product, and/or reliance on Pick Your Own.
- Insufficient volume to justify additional equipment.

Louise also identified growers interested in hosting the quick freeze unit for in-field trials. The mobile quick freeze unit ultimately made stops at:

- Blueberry Ridge (North Troy, VT)
- Green Mountain College (Poultney, VT)
- Champlain Orchards (Shoreham, VT)
- Pete's Greens (Craftsbury Center, VT)

### Goals and Outcomes Achieved

The discrete goal of surveying producers for interest in berry quick freezing was met (as described above). In addition, Louise helped place a brief update in Hobby Farmer Magazine that returned over two dozen inquiries from across the country and Canada from people interested in learning more about the technology. A more in depth article ran in the Boston Globe and is included at the end of this report.

Unfortunately, the producer study provided only a small part of the project and obstacles in other facets of the project have limited its overall success to date.

### Beneficiaries

Both Vermont berry growers and specialty food producers interested in using Vermont berries benefited from this project. There are approximately 220 berry growers who can benefit from this freezing unit. In addition to this primary target, the unit received interest

from producers making tomato sauce, apple sauce and poultry (meat & poultry are currently not allowed to be processed in the quick freeze due to a conflict of interest with the owner, the Vermont Agency of Agriculture).

### Lessons Learned

The original grant proposal for the Mobile Quick Freeze unit brought in the Vermont Mystic Pie Company and Vermont Food Venture Center as partners. As a large scale purchaser interested in expanding while remaining true to its mission of sourcing local products, Mystic Pie could provide a guaranteed market for berry growers if they increased their volume and used the mobile quick freeze unit to get it into high quality frozen form. The Vermont Food Venture Center, which incubates specialty food businesses, planned to provide the services of designing the quick freeze unit and using it in Venture Center education / development when not in use by the Mystic Pie company.

Shortly following the start of construction for the Mobile Quick Freeze unit, Mystic Pie went out of business and the Food Venture Center decided to relocate its incubator space. These double events eliminated the guaranteed buyer for product and also eliminated the outside operator.

The Vermont Agency of Agriculture is currently working to identify new options for organizations or businesses to operate the Mobile Quick Freeze and reach the original goal of increasing the supply of local ingredients in Vermont value added foods.

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## **VERMONT GRAPE AND WINE COUNCIL**

### Project Summary

Ten years ago, Vermont had very little winemaking activity, and almost no production from locally grown grapes. Today, 14 wineries exist with 200 Vermont businesses connected through producing ingredients and supplies or providing distribution. Research and plant breeding is establishing more cold hardy grapes. Expanding linkages between agriculture and tourism create a visitor demand for Vermont wines. Highly regarded pairing products, such as artisan cheese, complement the wine industry. On the flip side, wine manufacturers in Vermont face more challenges than other products around achieving a consistent good quality, gaining market recognition, and navigating state regulations. For these reasons, Vermont grape growers and wine producers considered it time to establish a formal council.

### Project Approach

Specialty Crop funds in Round One went towards establishment of the Grape and Wine Council, with the goal of enhancing Vermont's wine industry, and educating new and existing growers and winemakers.

The Vermont Grape and Wine Council includes grape growers, wine producers, and representatives from UVM Extension, the Agencies of Agriculture, Economic Development and Tourism and Marketing, and the Hospitality Council of the Vermont Chamber of Commerce. The purpose of this council is to provide long-term support to the emerging grape and wine industries in the state.

Initial steps towards establishing a sustainable group included:

- Studying similar wine councils in New York, which faces many of the same challenges as in Vermont.
- Incorporating the council as a non-profit organization.
- Setting up a website ([www.vermontgrapeandwinecouncil.com](http://www.vermontgrapeandwinecouncil.com))
- Starting a member newsletter.
- Unveiling the new council at a tasting reception held at the Vermont State House with 10 different winemakers.

Initial work also laid the foundation for participation in special events, partnerships with other value added food makers, printed marketing materials, and educational presentations. These initiatives appear under later rounds of SCBGP grants.

### Goals and Outcomes Achieved

The Grape and Wine Council was successfully established, with a diverse group of representatives eager to support their emerging industry and a full slate of starting activities.

The Grape and Wine Council has 21 members including:

- Two meaderies
- The U.S.'s first Iced Cider maker
- Wines made from blueberries, cranberries, pears, apples, raspberries, dandelions, currants, honey, rhubarb and (of course) grapes.
- A locally grown vine supply company providing cold hardy varieties

At the writing of this report, the Council had not yet surveyed members for feedback on how its first years had served their needs, but collecting feedback is a goal for the near future.

### Beneficiaries

Wine producers and related industries, such as grape growers.

### Lessons Learned

The Council project has progressed smoothly to date.

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## **HARVEST NEW ENGLAND**

### Project Summary

The residents of New England often do not think of this region as an area prominent in agriculture. Yet many residents are eager to buy and eat locally produced products. Harvest New England (HNE) provides New Englanders an opportunity to source more locally by identifying and promoting products grown in New England. The Harvest New England partnership allows state departments of agriculture in the six state New England region to work cooperatively to promote their local products, including 3,800 tree fruit, berry, and vegetable growers. HNE provides specialty crop producers with additional marketing support through advertising opportunities and promotional materials. This allows producers to promote locally grown products at their farm to increase on-farm sales.

The second biennial HNE Marketing Conference took place in winter 2009. The first conference held in February 2007 and was attended by approximately 700 people and 100 trade show vendors. The conference again focused on helping producers market their specialty crops direct to the public and to wholesalers within New England.

All New England states participated in funding development of the 2009 conference.

### Project Approach

The Harvest New England 2009 conference took place in Sturbridge, MA, February 24<sup>th</sup> – 26<sup>th</sup>. Topics covered included:

- Putting EBT to Work for Your Farmers' Market
- Market Managers Exchange: What's on Your Mind?
- Food Safety & Farmers' Markets
- Challenges & Rewards of a Winter Farmers' Market
- Expanding Regional Agritourism
- Online Marketing
- New Trends in Farm & Food Marketing
- Transferring Family Farms
- Farm Field Trips

All six New England states participated in the planning. The full agenda is available at: <http://www.harvestnewengland.org/>.

### Goals and Outcomes Achieved

The goal of the conference was to give all producers throughout New England the opportunity to obtain new marketing skills, helping them to increase the competitiveness of their specialty crops.

HNE's multi-state planning team designed an agenda (as described above) that could achieve this goal and provided marketing within their states through e-mails, posters, and notices in newsletters to attract interested growers.

The conference attracted over 750 participants from all six New England states. The Trade Show section was full with 100 vendors. The 2007 conference had 700 participants and also a full Trade Show of 100 vendors. A third conference is planned for 2011.

### Beneficiaries

Participating specialty crop producers directly benefited from the conference, 750 people. At the same time, many were bringing information and skills back to other growers in their region that could not attend. By this measure, far more producers benefited. With 4,200 farms in Connecticut, 7,100 in Maine, 6,100 in Massachusetts, 3,400 in New Hampshire, 850 in Rhode Island, and 6,300 in Vermont, nearly 28,000 producers have the potential to benefit from this program.

### Lessons Learned

The farm tours, a new feature in 2009, were a popular activity and more visit-based, hands on activities can be added for 2011. The HNE conference is currently the largest farm marketing conference in New England, but has an estimated capacity for another 250 attendees (reaching 1,000). More aggressive use of networks that were target audiences in 2009 – particularly farmers' market managers, farms entering agritourism, and NOFA members – can build that attendee base.

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## **APPLE PROMOTIONAL ACTIVITIES**

### Project Summary

Vermont apple growers produce and ship nearly one million bushels of apples annually. It is one of few specialty crops that Vermont produces for a primarily wholesale market, and is the leading specialty crop for the wholesale market in volume of sales. However, Vermont is negatively affected by recent trends in apple consumption – per capita U.S. fresh apple consumption dropped approximately 20% from 1990 – 2003. Vermont is

working with other apple growing states to lift overall fresh apple consumption, while also working to secure the share of that consumption supplied by Vermont growers.

### Project Approach

Specialty Crop Block Grant funding went towards a range of apple activities, primarily:

- Increasing the use of digital media to promote New England apples, and providing content for online promotions.
- Attending apple promotional events outside of Vermont state
- Securing a Vermont membership in national and international apple associations.

Partners in these projects included: Vermont Agency of Agriculture, Vermont Apple Promotion Board, New England Apples, New England Harvest, U.S. Apple Export Council, and United States Apple Association.

### Goals and Outcomes Achieved

The original project narrative outlined apple training activities as one application of SCBGP funds. An unexpected grant source paid for the planning training and educational activities, and so the equivalent amount of money was used to expand the planned apple marketing activities, primarily through the promotion video described below.

New England Apples used funds to both improve their website and produce two videos to post online featuring Vermont orchards. One addresses Pick Your Own etiquette and the other is a three part series on apple pie making. Their website features apple information, recipes, orchards to visit, and stores where consumers can buy New England apples. At the time of this report, work on video production and website upgrades had just finished and so information is not yet available on customer and producer response. The videos can be viewed at: <http://www.newenglandapples.org/>.

Representatives from the Vermont apple industry had the opportunity to make several trips on behalf of Vermont apples during Round One of the Specialty Crop Block Grant funding. They represented Vermont apples at:

- Fruit Logistica International Trade Fair for Fruit and Vegetable Marketing in Berlin, Germany in February, 2008.
- Annual New England Vegetable and Fruit Conference and Harvest New England Association meeting (held at the conference).
- U.S. Apple Association Board of Trustees and Committee Meetings in Washington, DC (funds also used from Vermont Apple Marketing Order)

In conjunction with Food Export USA, Vermont Agency of Agriculture staff also represented Vermont apples at:

- SIAL Montreal trade show
- Food Export Marketing Forum in Chicago, Ill

### Beneficiaries

Vermont's 264 apple growers that were active during the time of this grant benefited from the project.

### Lessons Learned

The updates to the New England Apple site are part of a variety of different media that have been utilized to reach customers with SCBGP funding in Vermont, both in this initial SCBGP round and in subsequent rounds. A sampling of the different formats includes:

- Online video & website updates (New England Apples)
- Online directories (New England Apples; Vermont Agency of Agriculture)
- Printed brochures (Grape & Wine Council)
- Printed calendar (Ginseng Association)
- Printed newspaper inserts (Vermont Harvest)
- In Person Demonstrations (Canning Produce)

Given the range of activities undertaken with Specialty Crop Block Grants, as well as funds from other sources, it is time to study which have had the most impact. The Vermont Agency of Agriculture has drafted the project proposal for this study and is securing graduate student assistance for spring, 2010, through the University of Vermont. Final results will be available by the close of the Round Four block grant.

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## **GENERAL SPECIALTY CROPS SUPPORT – FRESH PRODUCE IN SCHOOLS**

### Project Summary

The obesity epidemic is a health problem of serious concern for Americans. Over 30% of U.S. adults are obese, and the warning signs of this obesity are present from a young age. Increasing childhood consumption of fresh fruits and vegetables helps counteract unhealthy weight gain in childhood and also establishes a healthy eating pattern for the future. Utilizing local fruits and vegetables is a particularly effective way to build these healthy eating habits because the local products are often more fresh, resulting in better taste, and can be tied in to other learning activities in the community. Field trips to local farms, for example, make an additional impression on children that goes beyond the taste of the product. This project combines the goals of healthy eating and local fruit and vegetable sales by working with schools to increase fresh produce consumption by young students.

### Project Approach

The Vermont Agency of Agriculture has a long time partnership with Vermont Food Education Every Day (FEED), a consortium of three non-profit organizations (Shelburne Farms, Northeast Organic Farming Association, and Food Works) dedicated to linking Vermont schools with local foods. VT-FEED has established a model approach that combines teaching about local agriculture in the classroom, bringing local foods into the

cafeteria, and engaging the whole community in working with schools on a local foods initiative.

Specialty Crop Block Grant funds were awarded to VT FEED to fund the specialty crop related portions of developing a guide to best practices for incorporating local foods into the classroom. The project is called the Best of Vermont FEED Curriculum Guide. It includes:

- Resources providing introductory lessons for people with a casual interest in food, agriculture and nutrition to incorporate their interests into education for grade levels K through 8.
- 30 sample standards based education units for grades K through 8 that Vermont school teachers developed and tested through work with VT- FEED over the last ten years. These would include lesson plans, activities, follow-up and overarching questions, and scope and sequence for each unit.
- Tools, resources, copy-ready handouts and activity sheets, as well as resources to reference for additional material on these topics.

The sample curriculum units from the Best of FEED are downloadable, reproducible, and appropriate for teaching students in Kindergarten through 8<sup>th</sup> grade. Units have been produced by Vermont educators in conjunction with Vermont FEED, as part of Vermont FEED technical assistance provided to schools. These units include the following features:

- Unit Title
- Grade Level(s) Addressed
- Length of Unit (weeks of study)
- Table of Contents
- Project Summary
- Driving Concepts and/or Essential Questions and Focusing Questions
- Goals/ Vermont Standards to be addressed and assessed
- Background (when appropriate)/ Place-Based Considerations for utilizing this unit
- Sample Lesson Plans and Adaptations to other grade levels, where appropriate, including
- Pre- and Post- Assessment Tools and Rubrics, where applicable
- Unit Assessment Plan, Tools, and Tasks
- Samples of Student Work, where appropriate, to orient the reader
- Resource Packet
- Connections to Other Units of Study
- Recipes, where applicable

#### Goals and Outcomes Achieved

Forty-nine sample units for students from kindergarten through high school are now available online at:

[http://www.vtfeed.org/tools\\_and\\_resources/tools\\_for\\_teachers/Teacher\\_units](http://www.vtfeed.org/tools_and_resources/tools_for_teachers/Teacher_units)



The wide variety of subject matter and activities allows teachers or interested community members to find a useful resource to match almost any interest. Specialty crops represented range from broad lesson plans (*Comida Mexicana; From Seed to Plate*) to a focus on single products (*It's All About Squash; Not Just a Jack-O-Lantern*).

Plans also exist for printing these guides. However, staff turnover at VT FEED delayed that printing date until December, 2009. Funding for the printed publication comes from sources other than the Specialty Crop Block Grant, which funded developing the resource.

The Best of FEED guide represents years of Farm-to-School work. Although it is too early to measure the impact of this specific component of their program, the cumulative impact of the types of lessons highlighted in this guide has been measured through several VT FEED organizational reviews that are available online at: [http://www.vtfeed.org/tools\\_and\\_resources/VT\\_farm\\_to\\_school\\_impacts](http://www.vtfeed.org/tools_and_resources/VT_farm_to_school_impacts).

#### Beneficiaries

This project promoted specialty crops in general and was designed to benefit all Vermont produce growers. The Vermont Agency of Agriculture estimates 1,142 operations benefiting from the project.

#### Lessons Learned

VT FEED proposed the Best of Vermont FEED Curriculum Guide project as part of their evolution from intensive work with particular schools on promoting local foods to including more statewide collaborations in which schools learn from each others' experiences. Since the time of this grant proposal, VT FEED and community groups around the state determined a need for an even stronger collaborative platform and established the Vermont Farm-to-School Network. Koi Boynton at the Vermont Agency of Agriculture manages this network as a platform for everyone involved in Farm-to-School work to meet regularly to share information, plan collaborative projects, and set a state strategy for connecting local farmers with local schools.

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# New mobile equipment helps farmers preserve crops

By Lisa Rathke, Associated Press Writer | August 17, 2008

CRAFTSBURY, Vt. --Pete Johnson, owner of Pete's Greens, already extends his vegetable farm's summer bounty by using cold storage.

Now, he'll be able to quick-freeze some of his crop, thanks to a new Vermont Agency of Agriculture mobile freezing unit, allowing him and other farmers to offer customers more through the year.

The cargo trailer will travel around Vermont so processors can freeze berries and produce, at a rate of 600 pounds a minute.

"It brings some access to people that normally wouldn't have it. It gives them another marketing opportunity," said Kevin Schooley, executive director of the North American Strawberry Growers Association.

The individual quick freeze equipment, a technology called IQF, hits fields this summer.

Vermont and other states already have or are planning mobile meat- or poultry-processing units. But the quick freezing trailer is among the first in the nation designed to process and freeze vegetables right at the farm, officials said.

"From the point of view of a berry grower, this is a great idea," said Debby Wechsler, executive secretary of the North American Bramble Growers Association. "There's a real need for processing facilities."

Raspberries, for example, are so perishable that they need to be dealt with once they ripen.

"If you don't have some kind of way to use the surplus, you're just going to feed it to the pigs. ... It (the freezing unit) really helps the finances of the growers, it prevents the waste," she said.

The technology isn't new. Taking it to farms is, according to Brian Noder, project director of the Vermont Food Venture center in Fairfax, who designed the rolling freezer.

"The piece of equipment was designed to meet the state's unique desire to see this sort of on-farm processing happening," he said.

All farmers need to provide is a power source and labor.

Built at a cost of \$40,000, with funding from a U.S. Department of Agriculture grant and the Vermont Department of Tourism, its use will be free -- for now -- as the state Agency of Agriculture tests it out. Next spring, a private operator is expected to take it over, but it's unknown how much the service will cost then.

One strawberry producer has already signed up to use it next spring.

"I think once this thing starts being used, people are going to be looking for it," Johnson said.

Johnson, who sells organic vegetables to stores, restaurants and individual consumers, isn't sure what he will freeze. Perhaps squash puree, soups, maybe chickens.

He's about to transform a tractor trailer into a freezer where he will have ample room to store frozen food.

Demand for frozen Vermont berries is what led to the idea.

The Vermont Mystic Pie Co. wanted local strawberries and raspberries that held their shape.

"We have plans to expand the Vermont Mystic Pie with other kinds of berries," said founder David Barash. "The constraint was being able to go from harvest to processor with berries from the field."

The company could freeze stronger berries such as blueberries in bulk, but the raspberries and strawberries were often too mushy to work with. Now, they can be individually quick frozen at the farm.

With the freezing unit up and running, Vermont Mystic Pie plans to use 50,000 pounds of berries over the next couple of years, with plans for strawberry rhubarb and raspberry apple pies, Barash said.

"It's great for processors that want to use fresh fruit in a variety of products where it's important that the fruit identity hold firm," he said.

It's also good for farmers who have a glut of product but not enough refrigeration capacity.

"It would be a very difficult thing to start a business in the preservation realm and build all your own infrastructure, so this is really helpful," Johnson said. ■