

New Farm Viability Program: Expertise Where It's Needed

In early 2003, when organic vegetable grower Mimi Arnstein began setting up a new, community-supported agriculture operation on three planted acres in Marshfield, the Vermont Farm Viability Enhancement Program was also new. During the past year the program, which VHC developed in collaboration with the Vermont Agency of Agriculture, Food and Markets, has provided Mimi with four expert consultants: a UVM plant disease expert, a compost consultant, a business planner, and a veteran neighboring produce grower for general technical help. Their services were paid by the program, at no charge to the farmer's operation.

"I would not have been able to afford this kind of technical assistance—nor would I have seriously considered it, because of the cost," Mimi says. "But it's been helpful in lots of different ways."

Designed to strengthen the economic position of Vermont agriculture, and to work alongside existing land-conservation efforts, the Farm Viability Program can deploy a variety of consultants to meet a farmer's needs. In Addison County, for example, consultants helped dairy farmers Mark and Sarah Russell prepare for a major change — a planned move to what Sarah calls "Mark's dream farm."

"We rent a farm, and we've rented for approximately 17 years," Sarah says. The couple lives on Mark's family property in Sudbury, but that land doesn't have the farming facilities they need, so they've been renting a place in Sudbury. Last spring, when an Orwell farm that Mark has always admired came up for sale, the Russells made an offer.

"We just decided to go for it," Sarah says.

But making the change calls for a big transition. "We need to expand our herd numbers, we need to buy different machinery," she says. "It's a bigger farm; it's going to change our operation."

Farm Viability Program consultants have helped the Russells with financial and farm planning.

"We're going over our finances, planning for the future," Mark Russell explains. "Some of the people we're talking to are really challenging us on our management: 'Could you lower your production costs here? Could you raise your level of production?'"

Thanks to the program, he adds, "We have several different professional people working for us, and it's not costing us anything. We're not getting any direct cash payment; the grant comes to us in the form of technical assistance. Which I think is going to be worth a lot."

David and Mary Ellen Franklin and their three sons operate a small diversified dairy farm in Guilford. The Franklins are working with farm business consultants from Working Landscapes, Inc. through the Vermont Farm Viability Program to develop markets for their products.



Annie Van Avery

Mimi Arnstein is using advice from ag consultants and a business planner to maximize profits on her market garden in Marshfield. The consulting services were provided by the Vermont Farm Viability Program.

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—Mimi Arnstein



Peter Wrenn