

## Vermont Farm Viability Enhancement Program Provides Services to 50 Farms in Second Year of Operation

The Vermont Farm Viability Enhancement Program assisted more than 50 farmers in 2004. Participants ranged from the owner of a 650-cow Holstein dairy to the proprietor of a cut flower enterprise operating on one acre of rented land. Other enrollees included a farmer milking 20 Jerseys supplying an organic cheesemaker, a large-scale vegetable and berry grower, and a livestock producer developing local markets for fresh meat and poultry.

All of the participants had one thing in common—a desire to make their farms more profitable. The Viability Program connected each farmer with a financial consultant and a team of technical assistance providers whose job was to facilitate the creation of a farm business plan—a detailed strategy or “roadmap” for success.

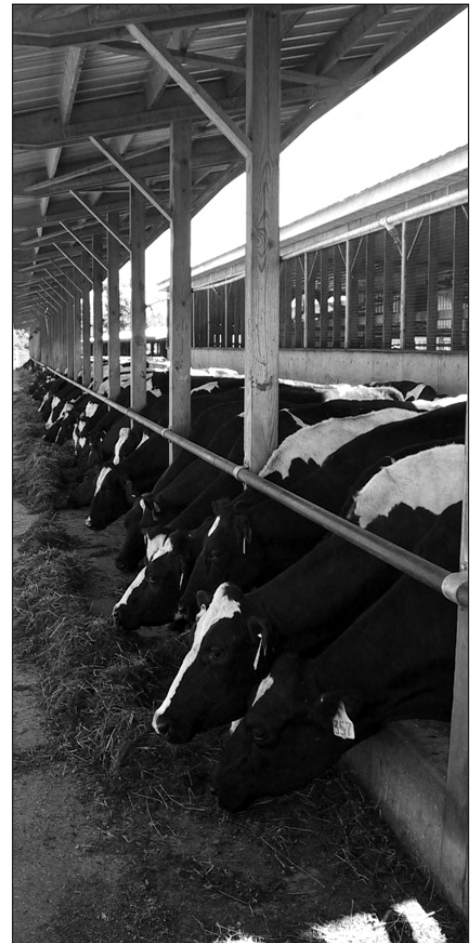
Under a bill passed by the 2004 Legislature, the Viability Program is advised by a panel chaired by the Secretary of the Agriculture Agency and nine others—the VHCB Executive Director, the Director of UVM Extension, the Commissioner of the Department of Economic Development, the Manager of the Vermont Economic Development Authority, a farm financial expert, and four farmers.

In 2004 the Program was funded entirely by VHCB; in 2005, VHCB funding will be supplemented by a grant from the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service. The Program is administered in conjunction with the Vermont Agency of Agriculture, Food and Markets.

Recognizing that there is no single path to farm profitability, the Viability Program approach is to listen, to let the farmers articulate their goals as well as their frustrations, and then to bring in assistance that is tailored to the farmer’s particular needs. This flexibility allows the Program to serve all types of agriculture, from traditional dairy to innovative, or value-added enterprises. The fundamental premise of the Program is that sound financial analysis, critical thinking, and business-oriented decision-making can make a difference.

The Farm Viability Program contracts with independent consultants, farm management specialists, and staff from NOFA-Vermont, the Intervale Foundation, the Vermont Small Business Development Center, the University of Vermont Extension Service, and Working Landscapes, Inc. These organizations received VHCB grants to provide services to farmers under Viability Program specifications and oversight.

Approximately 50 farm families will receive Viability assistance in 2005. At the same time, the Program will send advisers back to 2004 participants to gauge the farmers’ financial success since participating in the Program, and to offer technical assistance as farmers work to implement their business planning goals.



For more information  
or to apply to the  
program, call 828-0795  
or visit the website:  
[www.vhcb.org/viability.html](http://www.vhcb.org/viability.html)

## Finding a Creative Farm's Future

### Viability Program Is a Timely Aid to Applecheek Farm

About 10 years ago, John and Judy Clark, hard-working dairy farmers in Hyde Park, felt worn out. “And maybe a little disillusioned,” Judy recalls.

“We said, ‘Hey, we work so hard, and maybe are not making the kind of living we would hope to make.’ I mean, at least to be able to pay the bills on time.”

Rather than get out or grow bigger, the Clarks got creative. A decade later, they're still milking about 70 cows—but their farm is transformed.

A sign on Rte. 15 points the way to Applecheek Farm, on scenic open land surrounded by mountains. Each year, thousands of schoolchildren, Vermonters, and visitors to the state make that turn toward the farmstead.

The visitors take sleigh and wagon rides pulled by two Belgian draft horses. They go llama trekking, visit its emus along with its cows, and learn about how and why the farm went organic, five years ago. They may also visit the gift shop, enjoy a meal cooked in the farm's commercial kitchen, or attend yoga classes, retreats, or community or business functions in the long, beautiful hall the Clarks built atop an old bunker silo.

“Always when people come, we talk a lot about farming—and we don't

talk about it the romantic way,” Judy Clark says. “It's not all sleigh rides! We talk about the work, and why we went organic, and what that means. Often, when people leave, they say, ‘Thanks for the experience. I really learned something today.’”

Today, the Clarks are working with the Intervale Foundation on an effort supported by the Farm Viability Program to develop a business plan for the directions in which Applecheek Farm can go next. A grant is bringing expert consultants and Intervale Foundation staff members out to the farm for the planning project.

“About two years ago, our oldest son started showing an interest in coming back,” Judy says. Son John and his wife, Rocio, want to make a raw-milk, grass-fed, organic farmstead cheese here. Their younger son Jason, who runs a catering business, JDC's Just Delicious Catering, from the property, wants to build the visitor business, serving busloads of tourists

and others. John and Judy want to retire in a few years. How to make all those ideas work together?

“This Farm Viability grant—I mean, the timing was impeccable,” Judy says. “It has just been a godsend.”

The consultants are helping with business planning, with making and selling cheese, with marketing to larger groups of visitors and making the most of visitors' time on the farm. A UVM Extension Service expert will also work with the family to plan the farm's transfer to the new generation.

“So, do you think we're busy? Are things a little hectic around here?” asks Judy, smiling. “We never expected the boys to want to come into it. We tell people this is the most exciting, and the most challenging, time we've ever had.

“The boys are finding that the viability study and business plan are just so critical,” she adds. “They're finding a way that they can make a living.”

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In Hyde Park, John and Judy Clark have opened their farm to thousands of school children, Vermonters and visitors. They offer sleigh rides, llama trekking, home catered meals, and a meeting hall. Their marketing efforts will be studied by business consultants provided through the Farm Viability Program.

