



Vermont Farm Viability Enhancement Program

Since 2003, 162 farms have completed business plans through the Vermont Farm Viability Enhancement Program. These farm businesses own or rent over 20,800 acres and employ more than 350 Vermonters. More than a third of enrolled farms are conserved and approximately one third are certified organic. Over 50 percent are dairy farms, 27 percent produce vegetables, and many are quite diversified in the agricultural products they produce, including everything from maple sugar, sheep, goats and rabbits to berries, flowers, vegetable starts and mushrooms. Sixteen percent process products directly on their farms such as cheese, yogurt, wine, sausage, soup or pickles!

Farmers often enroll in the program to pursue some kind of transition or expansion, such as initiating new products or on-farm processing, expanding into new markets, constructing a new barn, transferring farm ownership, or examining energy efficiency. In some cases farmers may be preparing to apply for a grant or loan. In other cases farmers are simply interested in setting and documenting their goals, plans and finances with the assistance of a business planning professional. All enrolled farms are also offered technical assistance based on the farmers' needs, such as marketing, herd management, production, facilities design, or bookkeeping.

The Farm Viability Program was established at the Vermont Housing and Conservation Board in 2003 in collaboration with the Vermont Agency of Agriculture, Food and Markets. Since 2004 the Program has provided business planning services to between 50–60 farms each year. During the year-long process that culminates with the completion of a written business plan, program contractors offer in-depth financial analysis, assistance in goal setting, and analysis of the strengths, weaknesses and opportunities of the farm business. Targeted analysis is offered in specific cases for farm transfer planning, cash flow analysis or enterprise analysis.

In the year following business plan completion, follow-up visits and evaluations are completed. With funding from the Argosy foundation and a USDA Rural Development Rural Business Enterprise Grant, the program has been able to offer further assistance and grants for business plan implementation projects.

Services are delivered to farmers on the farm, and are provided by VHCB contractors or grantees such as the Intervale Center, Northeast Organic Farming Association–Vermont, the University of Vermont Extension Service, and Working Landscapes, Inc. Additional farm business consultants and technical specialists are contracted directly by VHCB. The Vermont Small Business Development Center is another important partner, providing a variety of services through grantee organizations.

To inquire about the Farm Viability Program or to apply, call 828-2117 or visit the Farm Viability Program on our website: www.vhcb.org

2007 Accomplishments

The Farm Viability Program aims to enhance the financial success and long-term viability of Vermont farms by providing business planning and technical assistance services to farmers. This year, the program helped 59 farmers to complete business plans and 44 past participants received follow-up evaluations.

The program provided 44 Implementation Awards to:

- complete farm business transfers or retirement plans
- design new barns or on-farm processing facilities
- create marketing plans for a new value-added product
- design websites
- develop federal grant applications
- evaluate energy conservation and production opportunities
- update business plans
- improve production efficiency

and 12 Implementation Grants for On-Farm Capital Projects:

- greenhouse & hoophouse construction
- computer point-of-sale equipment
- on-farm processing equipment and construction
- barn & farmstand construction
- site improvements
- walk-in freezer

With Help from the Farm Viability Program, Woodcock Farm Cheese Company Expands

On Woodcock Farm in Weston, Mark and Gari Fischer graze their herd of East Friesian sheep on 45 acres of lush organic pastures. The Fischers hand craft sheep and cow milk cheeses with names like Weston Wheel, Summer Snow and Timberdoodle. They market their cheese to distributors serving New York, Boston and Chicago markets, and to local restaurants and farmers' markets. Their West River Feta, a tangy sheep milk feta, has won three awards from the American Cheese Society.

The Fischer's flock produces milk from spring through early fall. Over the winter, Mark and Gari purchase cow milk from the Taylor Farm in order to produce cheese year round, and to make some softer cheeses that can not be made with sheep milk. To create a certain firmness and taste, some cheeses are made with a mixture of sheep and cow milk.

In 2006, with assistance from the Farm Viability Program, the Fischers worked with UVM Extension Service staff on a business and marketing plan. Having learned to make cheese over the past eight years, they were ready to take the next step—to produce more and grow the business. Their goal is to be producing 15,000 pounds of cheese per year within the next few years. That's up from the 6,200 pounds produced in 2004 and the 8-9,000 pounds produced each year in 2005 and 2006. In 2007 the Woodcock Farm Cheese Company produced 11,000 pounds of cheese. Their marketing plan showed a strong demand for their products, justifying a facility upgrade to allow them to pasteurize their cheeses and to expand the variety of cheeses they make.

A Farm Viability Program Implementation Grant funded by the Argosy Foundation allowed them to purchase the equipment and expand their production facility. The award was matched by personal savings and a loan. The Fischers installed a large cheese making vat and a new boiler and heat exchanger to facilitate the washing and pasteurization process.

A second Implementation Grant in 2007 funded five days of technical assistance provided by a French cheese-making specialist from UVM. On-farm workshops were open to other cheese makers.

According to Mark, "The Farm Viability Program has been a motivating factor for every step of our business—from a business plan to implementation funds, to technical assistance. Their support has helped us to take steps that may have taken longer or otherwise may not have happened at all."

Today, the Fischers have more room for cheese making, storage, aging, and packing. Two new cheeses have won accolades from the American Cheese Society: Magic Mountain, a hard, aged sheep's milk cheese described as sweet and nutty and Timberdoodle, a creamy Havarti style with a slight lemony finish. Yum.



"We've learned to make cheese over the past eight years, and now we're ready to take the next step—to produce more and grow the business. Our goal is to be producing 15,000 pounds a year within the next few years."

—Mark Fischer



Top: Mark Fischer with curing cheese. Below: Other cheese makers attended a 5-day clinic at Woodcock Farm with a UVM cheese-making specialist.