

DEEP-DIVE SESSIONS

5. At a Turning Point: The Future of Producer and Processor Associations in Vermont

What is the function that producer and processor associations play in Vermont's food system? What are the primary capacity needs of associations which would enable them to meet the needs of their members more effectively? How could partnerships with organizations like UVM Extension and the Agency of Agriculture help meet the needs of producer and processor associations? Join this roundtable style discussion to help address these questions!

Facilitator: Jake Claro, [Vermont Sustainable Jobs Fund](#)

Roundtable panelists:

Jolinda LaClair, Deputy Secretary, [Vermont Agency of Agriculture, Food & Markets](#)

Jeannine Kilbride, [Vermont Cheese Council/Cobb Hill Cheese](#)

Eric Noel, [Vermont Beef Producers Association](#)

Pat Sagui, [Composting Association of Vermont](#)

Terrence Bradshaw, [Vermont Tree Fruit Growers Association](#)

Rachel Schattman, [Rural Vermont](#)

Beth Holtzman, [UVM Extension](#)

Sherry Maher, [Vermont Farmers' Market Association](#)

Chelsea Lewis, [Vermont Agency of Agriculture, Food & Markets](#) Jack Gilbert, [VT Specialty Food Association](#)

This session should be of interest to the [Technical Assistance for Producers and Processors Working Group](#), the [Consumer Education and Marketing Working Group](#), and the [Financing Cross-Cutting Team](#).

Context—The [Producer and Processor Association Support Task Force](#), a task force of the Technical Assistance for Producers and Processors Working Group, determined that they needed to evaluate the needs and capacities of Vermont's producer and processor associations. Interviews were subsequently conducted with 15 producer and processor associations, and the results compiled in the report [At a Turning Point: Strengthening Vermont's Producer and Processor Associations](#). Partnerships emerged as a particularly important theme to the success of associations.

Frame—Looking forward, how do we increase or strengthen association-to-association and association-to-service provider partnerships? Start by discussing the partnerships your association has or has had in the past and we will advance the discussion from there.

Eric - VBPA/[Vermont Grass Farmer's Association](#)—VBPA and VGFA do cooperate. We offer a winter conference together. We're also linked to UVM Center for Sustainable Agriculture. Even with that, funding challenges are persistent. Funding for VGFA next year will be challenging. Both have a relatively small membership. Membership doesn't cover it. We have to go for grants or something else. The organizations are weak administratively, which diminishes strength of the members of the organization. More collaboration and joint venture and cross marketing between memberships is needed. Increase awareness of each other, increase awareness to general public. Don't need full time administrative help. Need a core of administrative assistance.

Julie - Vermont Dairy Industry—Echo Eric's comments. We're trying to figure out how to get administrative support. If other organizations are thinking that way we'd be interested in pursuing. This organization is unique in the sense that it brings in processors, regulators, farms, and academics. And yet we don't attract a large membership. We want to tell the story of dairy but because we're not well resourced we have a hard time.

Terry - Vermont Tree Fruit Growers Association—Longest running ag organization in VT. Connection with Extension is waning. Haven't had support since 2011. That said, Terry is the UVM apple guy. He's the president of the organization. Tricky hat to wear. Received a bit federal funding to fill his shoes. Needs board to step up. Fairly small membership. But would say 60% (40) of growers are members (75-80 producers).VAAFAM was helpful, but their apple guy retired in 2009. The majority of VT apples are put on a truck and sold out of the state. Have tried to run their own marketing programs. Haven't really been successful at getting grants.

Pat - CAV—Started by the Agency of Natural Resources and VSJF. Focus is on the process, but does a lot of the same stuff regarding education and outreach. We partner with ANR every year on a big event. Solid waste districts, composters, consultants are membership base. We spend a lot of time at the state house. [Act 148](#) opened the door for universal recycling of food residuals. Vermont is the first state in the nation to do this so we're just finding our way via the Food Cycle Coalition. There is a [U.S. Composting Council](#) that is helpful.

Chelsea - VAAFAM / Meat and Poultry Processing Association—Formed in the 90s. Focused on regulatory issues-making sure there's a voice in the state house. The association lost its nonprofit status and now Chelsea plays a staffing role. It's not a consumer facing organization yet. No formal membership structure. It's more of a network than an organization. Two meetings a year. What people wanted were networking opportunities. And the members haven't felt the love at the state house or from other producers, so they want their voices to be heard. Have tried to cultivate funds for TA. Next step is to develop a simple website and to figure out membership structure.

Jack Gilbert - VSFA—Restaurant and processing facility is intimately involved with VT products: compost, apples, beef. The association has been around for 25-30 years. Partnered with the [Vermont Grocers Association](#) to provide admin and staff support. Two meetings a year. 150+ members. 75-100 members attend networking meetings. The landscape in Vermont with lots of little associations is very fractured. Something to be said for strength in numbers. We have some crossover with VCC, maple, wine, breweries, and distilleries. All of this falls under the Vermont brand. There's something to be done, an opportunity to allow for some coordinated admin and marketing for Vermont brand (commodities and value added). VFFC working with small businesses to get to the next level. VSFA does provide insight and help through meetings. Unique expertise is marketing to larger distributors and retailers. Get people to join the VSFA listserv.

Jeannine - VCC—Food safety issues and GMO labeling are a concern. I have two businesses: cheese and frozen yogurt. And if we have to get GMO certification it could break us. A lot of cheese makers run on tight budgets. The GMO issue is very difficult to deal with. Used to affiliation with [Vermont Institute for Artisan Cheese](#) but that has been dismantled and has had a big impact on VCC. Currently can't get results from VAIC of an important study which is disappointing.

Kelly - VFMA—Created by legislature to be filter to farmers' market. NOFA Vermont got it going but they said you need to be your own thing. But they do provide staffing. They can write grants. That's why it works. Our board is market managers, who are mostly volunteers. And many of us don't have the skills to do so. VFMA has the job of coming up with best practices and being advocates. We've come up with criteria for being a farmers' market in VT. Getting farmers' markets to understand why they should join is a little difficult, but most have done so. I actually think having lots of small organizations is good—retains the unique identity and needs of the association members, but we need admin support. If we didn't have [Erin Buckwalter](#) we'd be in trouble.

Jolinda - VAAFAM—Enjoyed listening to your reflections. I spent 10 years with USDA Rural Development which provides funding. I started thinking seriously about the competition for diminishing resources. How could you most

effectively deliver the services? Most grant programs are meant to be 1-3 years. You may remember Ag Innovation Center. \$250,000 of 1.5 million went to organizational development. It was one of the most challenging areas. If you don't have one staff person, you often don't know what to apply for.

2007-2009: state agencies were cut. You could feel the pain. We've been focusing on how to rebuild without the resources we previously had.

There are some interesting models in Vermont: [Studio Place Arts](#) in Barre. Members come together: they pay dues, have admin, have a space and events. [Artisan's Hand](#) in Montpelier. [Frog Hollow](#). **What might co-located admin space look like? A collective ask for \$X. What would a 3 year period of support for a collective ask?**

Jake—Q regarding involvement of UVM Extension. How do these partnerships work for Extension, what's the benefit, and what do associations need to know to make them work?

Beth—It's important to link Beginning Farmers with the industry associations. Need for evidence in grant proposals is key. Need to be connected with associations/members to make those connections.

Terry—We're all chasing money and we're all chasing the same money. Having the data to justify what you're asking for is key. But we're still an island. Still talking about apples. Being able to collect data from members is critical.

Jolinda—Public perceptions of associations are probably different from what we think it is. Need to join hands in marketing. There probably is a way to create infrastructure to do this: to elevate the Vermont brand. Policy is another way to join hands.

Group—**It seems like there is a lack of promotion around the Vermont Brand—know that this work is ongoing, but the Vermont Brand marketing effort underway is not exclusively focused on food.**

So how does more collaboration actually occur?

Lynn—I just wanted to mention the [VT Ag and Forest Product Development Board](#): charged with a massive mission. Bring to the table a broad range of expertise and release a number of reports that may be assistance to associations.

Kelly—Never heard of VAFPD Board. Farmers' markets vendors need to get connected to these associations. We have the people who are just sticking their toes in. Need a conduit. Compile a list of associations and encourage vendors to join associations.

Lynn—West Virginia has a good model for connecting vendors and associations through farmers' markets.

Liz—Education committees at farmers' markets beyond involving kids. It's a hard time to get vendors together at the same time.

Kelly—How to connect newbies.

Nicole—The problems being described here aren't exclusive to associations. They are prevalent in the nonprofit world. Good models from around the country that show how collaborative can form and nonprofits and associations can work together/share resources.

Shared Service Model Resources:

<http://www.nonprofitcenters.org/centers/what-is-a-multi-tenant-nonprofit-center/>

http://www.ssireview.org/blog/entry/creatively_combining_the_back_office_a_series_on_shared_service_alliances

http://www.tides.org/fileadmin/user/pdf/Tides_Shared_Services_Benchmarking_White_Paper_2009.pdf

Terry—Still need a human on the ground.

Chelsea—Market access assistance; branding; food safety; government affairs; technical assistance; infrastructure; financing: these are the needs and certain entities are best able to serve those needs. Need to identify who serves each role.

Lynn—Of course, some groups have conflicting purposes or policy positions. Can't all be linked.

Sam—Sat on VGFA board for years. My problem is we are talking about needs for combined support; ultimately we need to talk about the ability of that association to operate like a business. That usually falls to the treasurer of the board, who isn't necessarily aware that that is the approach needed. Business planning with associations is really important, which also involves strategic planning. Our strategic planning helped us identify what was sustainable, defined our role much more clearly.

Beth—I think that's probably more important than infrastructure. Critical need for board and organizational development.

Sam—Tool co-op. Trying to figure out key services that organizations need. Pay into the "co-op" and check out the services. Associations then pay for what they need when they need it.

It might help to identify people who have helped with association bookkeeping, association strategic planning etc.

The other question that needs to be asked is: What is the willingness to pay for these services?

Sarah Isham - VEDA/[Vermont Agricultural Credit Corporation](#)—From a financing perspective, we have a hard time filtering proposals. Joint proposals are good. Identifying underutilized skillsets at existing organizations can help in putting together joint proposals.

Liz—Identifying top 3 project needs for each association. *The majority of this information is identified in the report.*

Kelly—Another important area to consider is websites. We need to get away from situations where a friend of a member is designing the site.

Terry—But also have it easy to use for whoever is administering the website. Having templates available that look good, are easy to operate, but aren't too costly. There's a range, where you pay too little and don't get the quality, but can also pay too much and get something that you don't have the time to manage.

Eric—Need to move with the technology. Things are changing rapidly and it's difficult to keep pace, but that's where things are moving.

Jake's takeaway messages:

- 👉 **Join the Producer and [Processor Association Support Task Force!](#)**
- 👉 **Explore opportunities to solicit funding for shared administrative resources, including organizational development (e.g., membership development), financial sustainability (e.g., revenue diversification), lobbying and/or policy support, and website development and branding (including**
- 👉 **Explore a business model for a shared "Network Center" that provides a menu of administrative support to producer and processor associations.**

