

Salvation Farms: Resilience through Surplus Management

Based in Morrisville, Vermont, Salvation Farms fills a unique niche in the food system. Salvation Farms' mission is to build increased resilience in Vermont's food system through agricultural surplus management. The organization diverts surplus produce to community members in need, thus building a connected, robust, and resilient food system.

Background

Gleaning refers to the act of collecting leftover crops from farmers' fields after harvest. These surplus crops are not economically profitable to harvest due to time constraints, labor costs, or imperfect appearance. In today's times, the extra produce is usually plowed under or fed to livestock. This is where gleaners enter the scene.

Theresa Snow started Salvation Farms in 2004 as a pilot program at Pete's Greens in northern Vermont, a farm where Theresa worked at the time. Since then, the organization has gone through numerous periods of growth and change, including a stretch when they operated within the Vermont Foodbank. In 2012, Salvation Farms became a federally recognized non-profit organization.

Mission

Salvation Farms is rooted in the philosophy that farms are, were, and always will be our salvation. The organization is also driven by the idea that local food should not be reserved for a certain segment of the population. Through robust partnerships with farms, for- and non-profit businesses, state agencies, and food access sites, Salvation Farms helps ensure surplus high quality produce is accessible to community members in need. In the process of building a more independent and local food econo-



FIGURE 1: Salvation Farms started as a pilot program at Pete's Greens in northern Vermont in 2004.

my, Salvation Farms educates the public about programs, systems, and policies supporting community food security.

Vermont Gleaning Collective

In its early years, Salvation Farms was very grassroots and executed all aspects of gleaning. Now, the organization provides technical assistance to food-focused non-profits by guiding the development, refinement, and management of effective gleaning programs. The result is the Vermont Gleaning Collective, a statewide collective of autonomous gleaning initiatives.

Volunteers use a statewide web based tool to register as gleaners anywhere in Vermont and in towns

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surrounding its borders. Member organizations that are regionally based and food-focused use the interface to post a 'glean event'. This automatically sends an email blast to the list of volunteers, who then register to attend the event. While this process sounds linear, there are a lot of moving pieces.

It is crucial for farmers to feel secure and confident in bringing volunteers onto their farm, which is their livelihood. "It is important to build some comfort for the farmer, show them you understand agriculture, appreciate their time, and respect them as business owners," says Theresa.

On the other end of the chain, Salvation Farms works to ensure that quality gleaned food is distributed to sites that serve some of the state's food or nutritionally insecure residents. This includes food access sites like pantries, institutional meal programs at nursing homes and schools, and the state-wide network of the Vermont Foodbank.

Beyond the farms and food access sites, providing a well-coordinated experience for the volunteers is a crucial element. "The biggest benefit comes to the volunteers," says Theresa. "It is the best opportunity to educate someone about the local food system, the national food system, the industrial food system, the global food system, and the charitable food system."

Vermont Commodity Program

Salvation Farms is plugging away on a new initiative called the 'Vermont Commodity Program'. Between 2012 and 2015, the organization piloted a portion of the program's concept at the Southeast State Correctional Facility in Windsor, Vermont. The initiative engaged 50 inmates through the Vermont Offender Work Program in a raw packing project, teaching them to clean, grade, and pack several crops, primarily potatoes gleaned from less than a dozen farms.

Working side-by-side with inmates, the pilot provided close to 300,000 pounds of potatoes to food access sites across Vermont. In this way, the pilot delivered locally grown fruits and vegetables to food access sites all over the region while providing robust workforce development to inmates.

Resilience

"We see resilience as multi-faceted," notes Theresa. "The more you educate, the more you create social change." Through its strong community engagement model, Salvation Farms is creating an educated and skilled cohort that is moving the food system towards greater sovereignty and localism. The workforce development in post-harvest handling and processing, provided through the Vermont Com-



FIGURE 2: Theresa, Executive Director of Salvation Farms, gleans a brassica greens mix with volunteers at Dog River Farm in Vermont.

modity Program, builds resilience in the food system by creating a skilled workforce that can participate in the local food economy.

Salvation Farms is slowly reducing the state's dependence on food from afar by increasing the amount of locally produced food available for consumption by those dependent on institutions and charity. With resource depletion and worsening climate impacts forecasted for the future, food from afar may not be a responsible investment. As food outside the region becomes harder to secure, Vermont will already have the systems in place to create value out of food currently lost in its communities.

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The pressing inquiry of whether food production can keep pace with a soaring world population emphasizes the burgeoning threat to global food security. By diverting healthy, surplus produce to food or nutritionally insecure community members, Salvation Farms is improving food security at the local level, creating a more resilient community.

Challenges

“The time and process to build buy-in is longer than I had anticipated,” says Theresa wearily. Garnering support for a grand new idea is a formidable feat. It is important to grasp that this vision transcends Salvation Farms. In reality, these are vital proposals for the future of Vermont and other states. The key, and the challenge, is finding stakeholders that are invested in the vision.

Identified Needs & Opportunities

The biggest need is funding. Because Salvation Farms’ programs are unique and challenging to describe, there is a great need for progressive funders who can conceptualize what these programs look like.

Secondly, Salvation Farms needs more opportunities to tell their story. Considering the complexity of Salvation Farms’ programs, condensing their message to “we’re wasting food, hungry people need food” is unfair to mission of the organization. “A lot people want that reduced message, but we are about decreasing everyone’s vulnerability, we’re about making farms valued in our community, we’re about shifting social perceptions, and those bigger impacts are harder to communicate.”

To learn more, visit www.salvationfarms.org

References:

Salvation Farms. <http://www.salvationfarms.org/> Accessed on July 25, 2015.



FIGURE 3: Four hundred pounds of gleaned apples are loaded into the Intervale Center’s truck for distribution.

Climate Change and the New England Food System Case Study Series

This briefing was researched and written by the UNH Sustainability Institute’s 2015 Climate Fellow, Ravdeep Jaidka. Ravdeep’s fellowship focused on documenting and communicating climate impacts and adaptation strategies for New England farmers and fishermen. Ravdeep graduated from the Agriculture, Food, and Environment Master’s program from Tufts University this May. She is currently the Supply Chain Coordinator at Equal Exchange, importing fair trade bananas from small producer groups in Latin America. The fellowship was based at the Sustainability Institute and hosted in collaboration with Food Solutions New England (FSNE). FSNE is a regional, collaborative network organized around a single goal: to transform the New England food system into a resilient driver of racial equity and food justice, health, sustainable farming and fishing, and thriving communities. Learn more at www.foodsolutionsne.org.