

Good Morning! My name is Lisa MacDougall. I am the founder and owner of Mighty Food Farm, a small, certified organic vegetable farm in Shaftsbury Vermont. This year will be my 12<sup>th</sup> year growing vegetables at Mighty Food Farm and my second year at its new site in Shaftsbury.

Mighty Food Farm grows 12 acres of certified organic vegetables with small plots of strawberries and fruit trees. We have a thriving year round Community Supported Agriculture program and we sell at the Bennington and Dorset Farmers Markets and the Williamstown Market in Massachusetts. We also supply local restaurants and the local Hannaford Grocery Store with our produce.

Mighty Food Farm is more than the 155 acres I own. I have worked hard to build a strong organic food community in greater Bennington County an area that includes the towns of Shaftsbury, Bennington and Pownal, and also includes nearby towns in Massachusetts and New York. It is extremely gratifying that people come to my farm and farmers market booths to get food to feed their families. Their support allows for a financially viable business.

Mighty Food Farm further contributes to the Bennington economy and supports the community by annually donating over 10,000 pounds of produce to the Kitchen Cupboard, a local food pantry in Bennington. The Cupboard serves about 1,000 low-income individuals and families. We receive funds from the North Organic Farmers Association's Farm Share Program. Through subsidizes, this program cuts in half the cost of CSA shares for those families and individuals in need. I feel it is both necessary and important to be a contributing part of my community.

None of this would have been possible without the initial assistance of the Vermont Housing and Conservation Board. In 2006, I started Mighty Food Farm with a rototiller and hand tools on rented land in Pownal, the banana belt of Vermont. The farm quickly grew from four acres to 15 acres of crops in just three years. In 2010 I also rented another farm in Pownal to increase my acreage and to improve my crop rotation. By 2011, Mighty Food Farm was growing over 20 acres of organic vegetables.

This was when, in 2011, I realized that in order to secure my future as a farmer I needed to own my own farmland. There was just no future living and working on someone else's land. So began 5 years of looking for suitable land to move my Mighty Food Farm.

It's not easy to find a farm. There were plenty of abandoned farms around but often the buildings are no longer safe, the land isn't suitable or the costs are much too high. I needed to stay in the Bennington area. My farm had a growing reputation and I felt it important to continue to feed my loyal customers but Bennington is a growing area especially for second homeowners. It turns out; flat land with good soils and lots of space is also good for houses.

Over an 18-month period I made offers on four farms and each time I was denied. I went to neighboring retired dairy farmers, who no longer had cows but did have fertile bottom land and asked to rent-to-own some acres but... Denied. I even went way up north to Grand Isle to look at farmland, but this only made me realize that my home and base was in Bennington County.

I searched and searched, and became very frustrated. I knew exactly what I could afford after participating in the Vermont Farm Viability Program and I knew I couldn't go higher and still sustain a farm. It seemed like there was nothing out there in my price range.

It was when I stopped looking for land that a farm in Shaftsbury became available through the Vermont Land Trusts' Farmland Access Program. It was a perfect location with mostly flat land and high quality soils but I knew I would need help to buy the property.

The Vermont Land Trust screens many applicants for their Farmland Access Program. There are many people who want to be farmers so it is a very competitive process. When I was chosen as the final applicant I still needed to secure financing. This I did through the Farm Service Agency and the Vermont Economic Development Authority. Then with the help of the Vermont Land Trust and funds from the Vermont Housing Conservation Board I was able to purchase the farm. Finally, I had a farm of my own.

An important aspect of the Vermont Land Trust's Farmland Access Program is attaining funds to purchase the development rights for the land- an amount for this farm that was over \$300,00. Purchasing the development rights eliminates the potential for future development thus lowering the value of the land and lowering the price I would have to pay for the land. There is no way I would have been able to purchase the farm without the sale of the development rights to the Vermont Land Trust.

Having my own farm means many things to me. It means I do not have to worry about my lease being terminated and it gives me the freedom to look ahead. It means I am building equity and economic stability as I build my soils and grow my vegetables. And it means that I will always be able to serve my loyal Bennington area customers.

All this would not have been possible without the Vermont Land Trust's Farmland Access Program and substantial funding from the Vermont Housing and Conservation Board. VHCB's generosity and support of the VLT program made my dream of owning my own farm a reality.

The continued strong engagement of VHCB is critical to maintain the Vermont landscape we all cherish. It is not some esoteric economic exercise of little importance. It is in fact essential for helping to conserve our farm and forestland in Vermont. Without the support of the VHCB, farms disappear and more tragically, so do the dreams of would be Vermont farmers.

Let me be clear about this: I would not be where I am today, a successful and contributing farmer, without the VHCB. Because of the VHCB I have a renewed sense of my business and I am making plans for the future. And just to let you know, my future looks good!

I know other farmers who due to the help of the Vermont Land Trust and the Vermont Housing Conservation Board now have farms of their own. They too are small farmers who are feeding their local communities and making a difference; a difference that would not be possible without the continued support of the VHCB. Keeping our farmland open and accessible to farmers is imperative for food production in Vermont, the beauty of Vermont, and our State economy.

I want to say a heart-felt thank you to our legislators for supporting VHCB in the past and for their continued support in future years. Let us not forget that there are more farmers looking for land in Vermont and wanting to contribute the way Mighty Food Farm does to our Vermont communities. It is necessary, it is vital that they receive the same support I did when I was land seeking.

Thank you for listening and for helping to enhance and preserve what we all love-Vermont's beautiful working landscape.