



PRODUCE SAFETY IMPROVEMENT GRANT PROGRAM

2019 Impact Report

 **VERMONT**
AGENCY OF AGRICULTURE, FOOD & MARKETS
www.Agriculture.Vermont.gov

The Vermont Agency of Agriculture, Food & Markets' Produce Safety Improvement Grant program helps growers improve on-farm produce safety.

Vermont produce growers are in transition to a new regulatory landscape under the Food Safety Modernization Act (FSMA) Produce Safety Rule and are simultaneously experiencing increased demand from produce buyers for on-farm food safety. The costs of complying with the FSMA Produce Safety Rule pose significant challenges for produce farms across the U.S. and especially on smaller farms.

The goal of the Produce Safety Improvement Grant (PSIG) program is to help Vermont produce growers implement on-farm food safety practices, transition to compliance with the FSMA Produce Safety Rule, and meet market demands for on-farm food safety.

Many Vermont produce farms are seeking to make significant investments in infrastructure, equipment, and design, and the two-year pilot of the PSIG program revealed significant unmet demand for these types of investments.

In fiscal years 2018 – 2019, invested \$148,029 in two rounds of grants to 17 Vermont produce farms that grow, harvest, pack, or hold produce. In both rounds, eligible application requests exceeded available funds within minutes; a total of 44 applicants requested \$353,470 in grant funds.

Support from the PSIG program will help to strengthen Vermont's produce industry, grow the Vermont economy, and make Vermont a more affordable place to do business.

Grantees have experienced the following benefits from PSIG investments:

- Improved cleaning and sanitation practices
- Increased process consistency and efficiency
- Improved quality of products sold
- Improved employee satisfaction and working conditions
- Increased production
- Extended season
- Increased market access

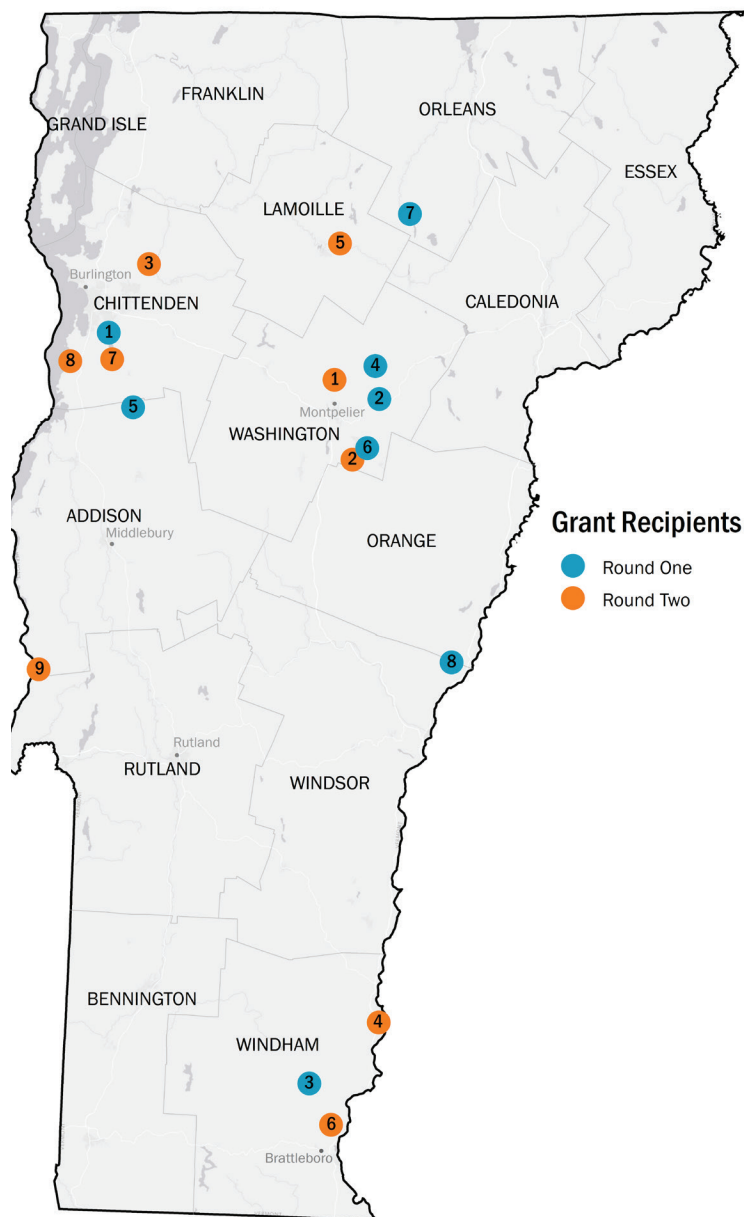


New Leaf CSA was awarded \$9,502 to upgrade their wash/pack house to a covered facility, and a cold storage unit, and install stainless-steel counters and sink for produce washing and handling.

“ The new structure eliminates the risk of contamination from overhead and the stainless steel sink and counters can be thoroughly cleaned and sanitized.

ELIZABETH WOOD Owner, New Leaf CSA

Produce Safety Improvement Grant Program Grantees **ROUND ONE GRANTEES**



- 1 Bread & Butter Farm**
SHELBURNE
\$8,664 to upgrade the wash/pack house and add hygiene signage around the farm
- 2 Cate Farm**
PLAINFIELD
\$7,156 to upgrade the packhouse with a concrete floor and drain and stainless steel equipment
- 3 Dutton Berry Farm**
BROOKLINE
\$9,407 to upgrade the wash/pack facility with a concrete floor and drain and equipment with easy to clean surfaces
- 4 Hoolie Flats, LLC**
EAST CALAIS
\$9,650 to upgrade the wash/pack facility with drainage, cleanable wall panels, and cleaning and sanitation equipment
- 5 Last Resort Farm**
BRISTOL
\$10,000 to add an additional cooler and upgrade existing coolers with temperature and humidity monitoring controls
- 6 Old Soul Farm**
BARRE
\$10,000 to enclose the wash/pack facility to reduce pest intrusion and upgrade the facility with concrete flooring and stainless-steel washing tables
- 7 Pete's Greens**
CRAFTSBURY
\$9,152 to integrate a wash water chiller and install temperature and humidity monitoring systems
- 8 Sweetland Farm**
NORWICH
\$10,000 to add floor drains and roofing to the existing wash/pack facility

ROUND TWO GRANTEES

- 1 Ananda Gardens**
MONTPELIER
\$10,000 to retrofit an existing barn to be adequately equipped to wash and pack produce
- 2 Bear Roots Farm**
BARRE
\$10,000 to install a year-round produce washroom, cooler, and stainless steel equipment
- 3 Chapin Orchard**
ESSEX JUNCTION
\$5,740 to upgrade storage areas with cleanable panels, a stainless steel sink, floor drainage and epoxy-based floor treatment
- 4 Harlow Farm**
WESTMINSTER
\$6,179 to upgrade the wash/pack line with materials that can be cleaned and sanitized
- 5 Naked Acre Farm**
MORRISVILLE
\$6,179 to build a wash/pack house
- 6 New Leaf CSA**
DUMMERSTON
\$9,502 to upgrade the wash/pack facility with a roof, cold storage unit and stainless steel counters and sink
- 7 Red Wagon Plants**
HINESBURG
\$6,400 to improve the wash station by adding a covered roof and concrete pad
- 8 Shelburne Orchards**
SHELBURNE
\$10,000 to add insulation to the refrigerated storage room and upgrade to plastic harvest/storage bins
- 9 Singing Cedars Farmstead**
ORWELL
\$10,000 to improve a pack shed to exclude outside elements and add cleanable surfaces and storage for produce and supplies

BREAD AND BUTTER FARM

SHELBURNE, VT

ROUND ONE GRANTEE \$8,664 to upgrade the wash/pack house and add produce safety hygiene signage around the farm.

Situated in Shelburne, Vermont, Bread and Butter Farm is hard to miss. However, what you might not see passing by is the collaborative atmosphere that the farm exudes. Bread and Butter farm is integrating farming, experiential learning, land stewardship, and community to create, in their words, 'a truly sustainable, long term collective for generations to come.'

Part of this collaborative system is to provide healthy, safe, high quality food through their farm store and CSA. Corie Pierce, owner and farmer at Bread and Butter Farm, sought to make improvements that would address some food safety concerns. In January 2018, Bread and Butter Farm received a \$8,664 Vermont Produce Safety Improvement Grant (PSIG) to enclose their wash/pack area and add sinks and hygiene signage around the farm.

The enclosed wash/pack facility makes it easier to exclude pests from the area. Stainless steel washing tables that were installed will allow for easier and more effective cleaning and sanitizing. And the hand-washing signage around the farm, will make it easy for visitors and employees to locate appropriate hand-washing areas. Finally, to establish consistency and reduce risks of contamination, a portion of the grant funds were used to upgrade totes to identifiable, single-purpose harvest, storage and compost bins.

In addition to food safety improvements, Pierce has noticed an uptake in process efficiency. They have seen improved product flow through their wash/pack shed and are able to extend the time frame that they can work in the building.

As for the future, the farm envisions collaborative marketing and managing. Pierce foresees a farmer co-op where there is increased ownership among employees who can invest their lives into the land. She plans to continue working on their business scope with all facets in mind.



“We were really excited to find out about the grant and knew that the best thing for us would be to upgrade our wash/pack area. We really wanted to be able to have it closed in and upgrade our tables to stainless-steel to make it easier to clean and have a great and easy flow.”

CORIE PIERCE Owner, Bread and Butter Farm





For us, this project would have been out of our means. Being able to have the [PSIG] funds to improve our wash station more than we could have before has been the biggest help we could have imagined.



MATT SYSTO Owner, Old Soul Farm



OLD SOUL FARM

BARRE, VT

ROUND ONE GRANTEE \$10,000 to enclose the wash/pack facility and upgrade the facility with concrete flooring and stainless steel washing tables.

Old Soul Farm is a diversified 1½ acre market garden in Barre that grows vegetables, fruit trees, nuts, berries and flowers and raises chickens.

The farm's mission is to become self-sufficient through sustainable agricultural practices and permaculture design – and they are well on their way. They use no-till methods, make their own compost, and do not use pesticides – even organic pesticides. “Everything we do is basically to have zero input,” says Old Soul Farm owner Matt Systo, “So, everything that we possibly can, [in terms of] fertility [and] nutrients is all stuff that we can raise here on the farm.”

Old Soul Farm used their grant funds to enclose their wash/pack facility to reduce the risk of pest intrusion and to upgrade the facility with concrete flooring and stainless-steel washing tables that will allow for thorough cleaning and sanitizing. The upgraded facility used to be an old dairy-barn that at one point held 200 cows. While having the basic structure was a benefit for the produce operation, PSIG funds allowed them to minimize risks and maximize the space without a complete rebuild.

Beyond the scope of produce safety, Systo expects the project to increase efficiency on the farm. “As we discover new ways our updated wash station improves [produce] safety, we also uncover new ways it improves our efficiency. We are finally able to lay out our floor plan to shorten the time it takes to wash our produce. An enclosed space we can eventually insulate and heat means we can safely and efficiently wash and pack produce year round. We can't wait to see what other improvements we discover.”

SWEETLAND FARM

NORWICH, VT

ROUND ONE GRANTEE \$10,000 to add floor drains and roofing to the existing wash/pack facility to reduce standing water and reduce risks from outside elements.

Sweetland Farm is a diversified family farm nestled in Norwich, Vermont. In a pursuit to expand and improve their operation, Norah Lake, owner and farmer, applied for a Vermont Produce Safety Improvement Grant and was awarded \$10,000 in grant funds in January of 2018 to upgrade their wash/pack facility.

Sweetland Farm purchased land from the Vermont Land Trust in the Spring of 2012. Their vision was to primarily grow vegetables for a CSA and to build farm diversity. “Our CSA has grown incrementally over the last six or seven years, as has our efficiency and produce safety,” says Lake. “As we’ve grown a little bit every year, we’ve started to fine tune our systems. Now, after the recent construction with the help of the PSIG funds, we have a concrete slab where we are washing [produce] underneath a roof, we have permanent stainless steel counter tops, and have a walk-in cooler.”

Prior to the project, Lake was primarily concerned with contamination from above. Having a partially-enclosed wash/pack facility with a roof has improved not only the cleanliness of their produce, but the quality as well. “The feedback that we have gotten from our customers have been so positive. We have had people come in this season and say, *We notice that the produce is so much cleaner this year!*”

Sweetland Farm plans to continue fine-tuning their layout in the wash/pack facility to find what works best for them in terms of work flow, efficiency, and food safety.

Images courtesy of: Vermont Agency of Agriculture; Sweetland Farm



“ This grant was an incredible boon for us. We had been really hoping to do this project and looking for the money to make it happen. The feedback that we have gotten from our customers has been so positive.

NORAH LAKE Owner, Sweetland Farm





This grant has enabled my continued access to the New York wholesale market. This year feels like a watershed where buyers are demanding local suppliers take steps to come into compliance with the [Produce Safety Rule]. I'm happy to be ahead of the curve.

MIKE BETIT, Owner, Hoolie Flats, LLC



The University of Vermont Extension Produce Safety Team provides **technical assistance and support** for PSIG grantees and those interested in making on-farm produce safety improvements.

Through an FDA Cooperative Agreement the Vermont Agency of Agriculture granted funds to UVM Extension for educational programming to support the produce community. This award supports the team to offer growers assistance with development and execution of projects submitted to the PSIG program. The team consists of Chris Callahan — Extension Ag Engineering Faculty, Andrew Chamberlin — Ag Engineering Technician and Hans Estrin — Produce Safety Specialist. They collaborate with VAAFM Produce Program staff on supporting grantees in project planning, monitoring PSIG project implementation and verifying project completion when appropriate.

The UVM Extension Produce Safety Team offers Vermont produce growers educational workshops, trainings, and one-on-one on-farm assistance with planning, construction, and renovation of infrastructure and equipment, that align with Produce Safety Rule standards. They also assist with grower/designer/builder communication, project planning, and document case studies of on-farm produce safety infrastructure improvements.

Through farm site visits, phone calls, and email conversations, the team has provided direct technical assistance to 39 farms. 31 of these farms have clarified plans for post-harvest wash/pack and storage facilities and 11 producers applied for PSIG funding in support of infrastructure improvements with 8 securing funding.

Regardless of whether the producer receives funding under the PSIG program, the team diligently works to provide technical assistance with a focus on increasing knowledge, clarifying plans and making recommendations for upgrades, planning, and layouts that support on-farm produce safety improvements.



ROUND TWO GRANTEE

Shelburne Orchards received a \$10,000 grant to add a protective layer of insulation to a refrigerated storage area and to replace existing wood bins with cleanable plastic bins.



The quickness of the response of all of you at the [Agency] of Agriculture was amazing. How quickly you got back to me, how readily available the information was. I think in two days I had somebody out here [from UVM Extension] on the farm, looking at the farm and the project we were thinking about and giving us advice about what would be a good project.

It felt very supportive and made it really simple for me.

MORIAH COWLES
Shelburne Orchards



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