



Vermont Housing &
Conservation Board

VERMONT FARM & FOREST
VIABILITY PROGRAM

2020 ANNUAL REPORT



A LETTER TO LEGISLATORS

Dear Members of the General Assembly:

This year has been one of transition and adaptation. Confronted with the impacts of a global pandemic, climate change, and persistent obstacles to land access and profitability, our working lands entrepreneurs have embodied resilience. These unprecedented times also underscored the essential value of our working landscape, its stewards, and the role of advising and technical assistance in advancing this sector's long-term viability.

VHCB's Vermont Farm & Forest Viability Program also evolved in 2020 to meet urgent needs of working lands entrepreneurs, as this report details. Launching a COVID Response & Recovery Coaching program, the Viability Program supported 524 working lands businesses with navigating state and federal relief programs, making time-sensitive pivots toward new sales channels, financial planning, and accessing critical mental health resources. Our core advising and succession planning program continued in parallel, serving 186 farm, food, and forest products businesses in FY20.

We also continued to support long-term business investments and advance clean water initiatives through our grant programs. With funding from the Capital Construction and Bonding Act, we awarded \$1,234,001 for water quality improvements on 37 farms, leveraging nearly \$6.3M. Our Business Plan Implementation Grants awarded \$54,926 to 10 producers, leveraging \$256,784, to bring business plans to fruition.

Our capacity building efforts supported the Vermont Food Hub Collaborative in expanding markets for Vermont producers and provided grant-writing expertise to rural communities through the Rural Economic Development Initiative, which over three years, has leveraged \$225,000 to secure \$4.9M for Vermont communities. Regionally, we aided the development of the Agricultural Viability Alliance (AVA), an association of agricultural business assistance providers in New England and New York's Hudson Valley, serving entrepreneurs across four states.

In March 2021, Viability Program Director Ela Chapin will be moving on after 15 years of service. We have immense gratitude for her skillful leadership in expanding the program's reach while bolstering a network of service providers locally and nationally. Impacting hundreds of businesses, her work has strengthened our working landscape. We also congratulate Liz Gleason, who will be assuming leadership of the Viability Program after 10 years with VHCB, serving the last four years as Viability Program Manager.

We enter 2021 with optimism as we direct our energy toward ensuring equity in our programming and empowering diverse entrepreneurs across Vermont. We thank you for your support in building a more resilient working landscape.

Sincerely,



Executive Director Gustave Seelig
Vermont Housing & Conservation Board



Secretary Anson Tebbetts
Vermont Agency of Agriculture, Food & Markets



Commissioner Michael Snyder
Vermont Dept. of Forests, Parks & Recreation



Viability Program staff and service providers (2020)

OUR MISSION:

“To enhance the economic viability of Vermont farm, food, and forest products enterprises.”

OUR NETWORK OF SERVICE PROVIDERS:



A TIME OF TRANSITION

After nearly 15 years as the Director of VHCB’s Viability Program, **Ela Chapin** will be stepping away to explore other passions. Her leadership has expanded the breadth and depth of advising support for working lands businesses in Vermont, regionally, and nationally. Our working landscape is stronger thanks to her service. We are excited to announce that **Liz Gleason** will serve as Director of the Viability Program beginning in February. After 10 years at VHCB, and serving since 2016 as Viability Program Manager, Liz brings a wealth of knowledge, experience, and commitment to this work. We look forward to the path ahead!



Ela Chapin



Liz Gleason

AN INTRODUCTION TO OUR WORK

The Vermont Farm & Forest Viability Program, a program of the Vermont Housing & Conservation Board (VHCB), empowers working lands owners and stewards across the state, providing them with business skills, connections to resources, and planning support to improve their businesses and long-term viability. This work furthers the mission of VHCB to “maintain for the benefit of future generations the essential characteristics of the Vermont countryside,” complementing investments in housing, conservation, and historic preservation that enhance economic vitality and quality of life across Vermont.

In 2020, our Viability Network of business assistance professionals provided coaching and advising tailored to the individual needs of each client. Additional activities included launching a new program to address urgent pandemic-related needs, targeted grant-making to businesses, facilitating development of a regional service provider network, and providing capacity to rural communities to support economic development goals.

TARGET IMPACT AREAS & OUTCOMES

COVID Pandemic Response & Recovery Coaching

- 524 working lands entrepreneurs received one-to-one coaching from March through December 2020 to help navigate pandemic impacts
- 82% of businesses were assisted in applying for relief programs

Empowerment: Building Skills & Planning for Bright Futures

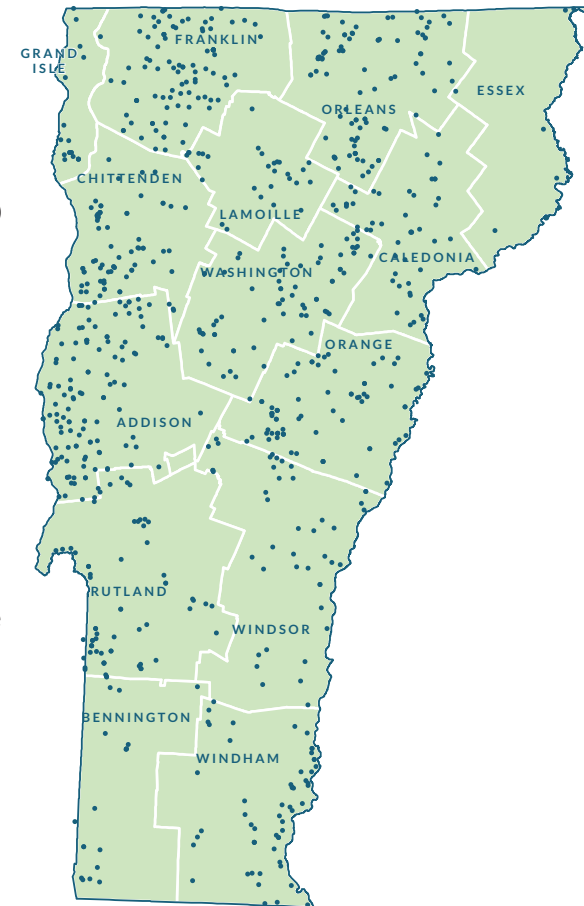
- 186 farm, food, and forestry enterprises received business coaching to develop business and transfer plans
- Nearly 1/3 of clients engaged in succession or transfer planning, helping to keep working lands in production

Investing in Working Lands Owners & Stewards: Targeted Grant-Making

- 47 grants, totaling nearly \$1.3M and leveraging an additional \$6.5M, awarded to farms to invest in the future of their businesses through infrastructure improvements and innovative technologies

Capacity Building & Connection: Strengthening Rural Communities

- Provided capacity to 13 small communities to apply for grants, garnering \$1.4M for 9 projects
- Supported the launch of the Agricultural Viability Alliance (AVA), an association of agricultural business assistance providers in New England and the Hudson Valley region of New York



● Viability Program Graduates & Grantees (2003 - 2020)

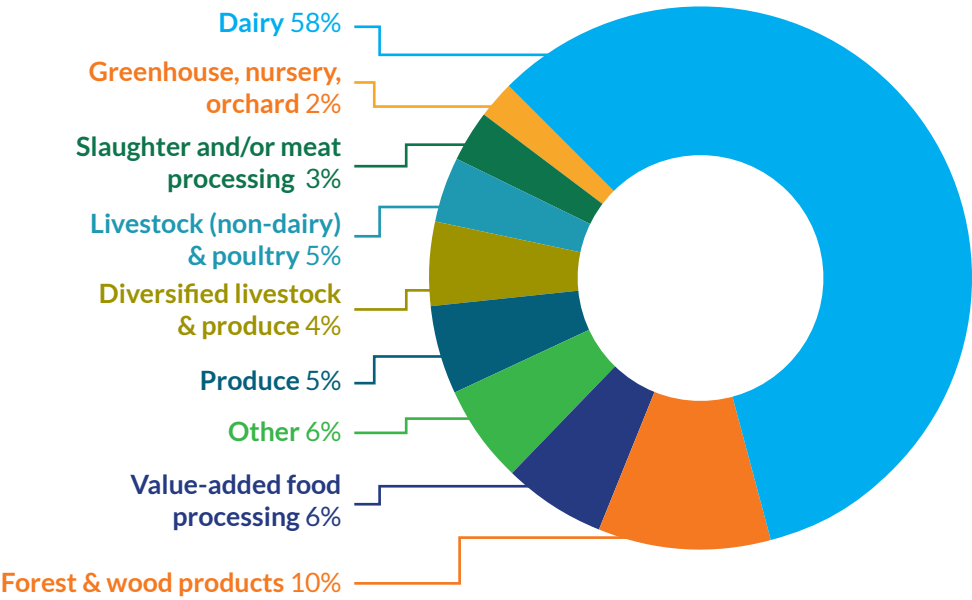
COVID RESPONSE & RECOVERY COACHING:

The COVID-19 pandemic ushered in rapid changes for individuals, communities, and our economy. Working lands entrepreneurs have been at the front lines, experiencing dramatic sales swings, loss of markets, extraordinary demand for local foods, and new expectations for upholding health and safety – all while continuing to carry out essential duties to sustain their communities.

The role of the Viability Program is to support the success of Vermont’s working lands entrepreneurs, improving business outcomes and overall well-being. Furthering this mission, we launched a new COVID Response & Recovery Coaching program in March 2020, in addition to our longer-term advising and grant programs.



BUSINESSES SERVED THROUGH COVID RESPONSE & RECOVERY COACHING



From late March through December 2020, the program supported more than 520 entrepreneurs who steward an estimated 175,734 acres, gross \$312.9M in annual revenues, and provide 2,157 jobs (FTEs). In collaboration with the Agency of Agriculture, Food & Markets, the Viability Program ultimately assisted nearly 400 producers with applying for the Vermont COVID Agricultural Assistance Program grants.

Supported with an initial Working Lands Enterprise Initiative grant and sustained through federal CARES Act Coronavirus Relief Funds allocated by the State Legislature, this program was able to respond to producers’ immediate needs. Entrepreneurs received assistance with accessing state and federal relief programs and nearly a third received help with financial management. The program also provided support with pivoting sales models toward direct and online sales, connecting with health and wellbeing resources, and addressing labor and human resources challenges.

IROQUOIS ACRES

BRIDPORT

STEPHANIE POPE

In April 2020, the COVID pandemic brought with it significant, unanticipated price declines and a quota on milk production for many conventional dairy producers across the country. Iroquois Acres, a fourth generation dairy in Bridport with 2,000 acres across their two locations, was in the extremely challenging position of not being able to cover production costs. Stephanie Pope reached out to the Viability Program for urgent support to access financial resources and develop a plan to keep her family's business going. Business advisor Rose Wilson assisted her in navigating federal relief programs and analyzing finances to determine how to maintain operations in this extremely lean time. With timely guidance, the family was able to make informed decisions about how to allocate resources and stabilized their business.

VON TRAPP FARMSTEAD

WAITSFIELD

MOLLY SEMLER & SEBASTIAN VON TRAPP

Like many artisan creameries in Vermont, when the pandemic hit, the family-owned von Trapp Farmstead in Waitsfield experienced dramatic losses overnight. When sales to their distributors suddenly dropped by 50%, Molly Semler and Sebastian von Trapp sought business coaching assistance to pivot and navigate the opening of a new farm store, yogurt enterprise, and mail order program that would provide food directly to their community.

Molly and Sebastian worked with business advisor Rose Wilson to develop a sales strategy and analyze their new costs to ensure this venture would support the quality of life goals laid out in their business plan. With the store opening in November 2020, the team is using data to inform their strategy, meet community needs, and build a more resilient business going forward.

"The pandemic caused 30 percent of our income to disappear overnight. Working with Rose through the COVID Response program allowed us to build a cash flow and budgeting tool that has helped us stabilize and improve our efficiency. We've adapted this tool for different situations, which has been crucial to making informed business decisions – it's been a game changer for us!"

- Stephanie Pope

"When the pandemic hit, our markets disappeared and sales plummeted. As we rapidly launched new branches of our business, we needed help getting organized to make sure these efforts would support our business' viability, not just cover operating costs. Rose has been an amazing help with analyzing our costs and establishing targets for sales needed to make sure the farm store can sustain itself and support our long-term goals."

- Molly Semler



EMPOWERMENT:

BUILDING SKILLS & PLANNING FOR BRIGHT FUTURES

During FY20, 186 farm, food, and forest entrepreneurs enrolled in the Viability Program and met regularly with a business advisor to work on business development. Entrepreneurs enroll to develop a business plan, plan for retirement and ownership transfer, access capital for growth, as well as fine tune financial management and planning skills. Since 2003, the Viability Program has assisted more than 800 agricultural and forestry sector businesses with business and succession planning.

Through tailored and holistic advising, entrepreneurs improved financial and management skills during a challenging time for the working lands sector. From 2019 to 2020, the number of farm and forest products enterprises reporting high satisfaction with work-life balance more than doubled. Clients reporting outcomes in 2020 also increased their ability to generate household income from their business after participation. These enterprises represent a significant economic footprint, comprising an estimated 420 jobs (FTEs) and generating more than \$23.8M in gross sales annually.

72%
OF CLIENTS REPORTED
INCREASED
GROSS SALES

NET INCOME
INCREASED BY

16%
ON AVERAGE

AIRES-HILL FARM

BERKSHIRE

KARIE THOMPSON ATHERTON

Karie Thompson Atherton manages Aires-Hill Farm on 750 acres in Berkshire. “Being the seventh generation, I’m proud. There is pressure though – my biggest goal is to turn it over to the eighth,” Karie shared. Karie’s work with the Viability Program has led to implementing innovations on the farm, including grooved flooring and cow-monitoring technology to support healthier animals and create more manageable workloads. In 2020, Karie was awarded a \$6,000 Implementation Grant for a custom forage box to get quality feed from the fields to their animals faster, helping Karie meet her goals to create efficiencies that support long-term viability. She is also engaging in business and transition planning as she takes the reins from her parents and explores diversification strategies to make up for depressed milk prices. Part of Aires-Hill’s COVID pivot has included the launch of a micro-creamery and a farmstand where Karie is selling milk, beef, and cheese curds. Working with advisor Tony Kitsos at UVM Extension, Karie is updating the business plan for the dairy and creamery as well as navigating the succession process.

“The Viability Program helped me take the time to think through my strategy. It opens doors because you have questions and can connect with someone who has expertise in the areas you’re unsure about. It can get secluded out here, and there are more resources than I ever dreamed there would be. The Viability Program gets you connected to them. Making the connection with the Viability Program was priceless”

– Karie Thompson Atherton



EMPOWERMENT:

BUILDING SKILLS & PLANNING FOR BRIGHT FUTURES

BUSINESSES IMPROVED KEY SKILLS IN:

Data represents the change in number of clients reporting high skills in these aspects of business management after program participation compared to beforehand.

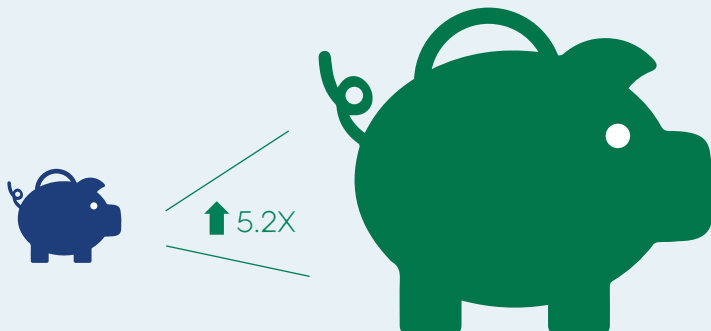
FINANCIAL ANALYSIS



ACCESSING RESOURCES OR SPECIALISTS TO ASSIST BUSINESS DEVELOPMENT



PLANNING FARM INVESTMENTS



STRATEGIC PLANNING



REBOP FARM

BRATTLEBORO

ASHLYN BRISTLE & ABRAHAM MCCLURG

Ashlyn Bristle and Abraham McClurg co-own and manage Rebob farm, a diversified, pasture-based livestock operation on 32 acres in Brattleboro. They produce meat and raw milk sold through their Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) enterprise and farm store. Early challenges with reviving degraded soils and animal fertility threatened their goals to achieve profitability. Working with business advisor Jen Miller at Northeast Organic Farming Association of VT (NOFA-VT), they developed budgets for each animal group and pursued efforts to increase efficiency, decrease production costs, improve animal health, and enhance their pastures. They also received technical assistance to build a marketing plan, positioning them to meet sales goals with their new farm store, which also hosts a community gathering and educational space.

In 2020, they received a Viability Program Implementation Grant to bring another part of their plan to life. “Our labor was not efficient,” Ashlyn shared, “we were spending half our days moving product and restocking. We needed to move the storage closer to the final retail site and be able to separate the costs from our personal finances.” Awarded a \$6,000 grant, they were able to install a 10’x12’ walk in cooler, allowing them to produce more food to meet community needs, reduce workloads, and improve work-life balance.



RICK'S FIREWOOD

HARDWICK

RICK KESTERSON

Clifton “Rick” Kesterson owns and operates Rick’s Firewood in Hyde Park. His search for high quality, reasonably priced firewood in his community inspired him to launch the business in 2015. Starting with a single small wood processor, the business scaled rapidly to meet local demand. When demand again outpaced his production, Rick knew he needed outside business planning expertise and financial assistance to bring his business to the next level. Rick worked with Chris Lindgren at UVM Extension, analyzing the management systems in place to improve efficiency in the office and in the log yard. Chris also assisted Rick with updating his business plan to reflect his goals to expand markets for kiln-dried wood and grow Vermont’s forest economy by creating jobs and providing a steady market for loggers. Additionally, Rick applied for a Working Lands Enterprise Initiative Grant with Chris’s support, and was awarded a \$150,000 Supply Chain Impact grant for a state-of-the-art kiln drying system to boost his output of high quality firewood.

Working with the Viability Program helped me focus and clarify my goals for the business. Chris has helped me take my business plan to the next level and was instrumental in my success with the Supply Chain Impact Grant.

– Rick Kesterson





EMPOWERMENT:

BUILDING SKILLS & PLANNING FOR BRIGHT FUTURES

Ensuring Vermont's working lands remain productive and accessible for future generations requires concerted planning by businesses currently stewarding the land, new entrepreneurs, and family landowners.

According to the [Vermont Agriculture & Food System Plan](#) (Vermont Agency of Agriculture, Food & Markets & Vermont Sustainable Jobs Fund, 2020), as many as 300 farms could change ownership from 2020 to 2025. Although 21.6% of Vermont's agricultural land is conserved, much of Vermont's working landscape may be at risk as many retiring farmers do not have an identified successor and nearly half have not engaged in any form of succession planning. Moreover, beginning farmers rank land access and affordability as their greatest barrier to farming.

Supporting farmland access for the next generation is a critical priority for VHCB. Responding to the increasing demand for transition planning and farmland access support, we help exiting farmers prepare for retirement and provide business and land access assistance to new and beginning farmers. Services also include coordinating critical technical assistance with legal and financial experts, estate planners, conservation professionals, and mediators. We work in close partnership with VHCB's Farmland Conservation Program, Vermont Land Trust, and others, as land conservation is a key tool for protecting agricultural resources and increasing farmland affordability.



OLD ROAD FARM

GRANVILLE

GABBY TUITE & HENRY WEBB

Gabby Tuite & Henry Webb are the farmer-owners of Old Road Farm, an organic vegetable farm in Granville. Starting small on a quarter acre in Monkton, they tested ideas and production methods. As their business grew, they began searching for land that would suit their long-term goals. Utilizing a web-based tool managed by the Intervale Center called [Vermont Land Link](#), they found the perfect property then sought guidance from the Vermont Land Trust to purchase and conserve the farm, an opportunity funded in part by VHCB's Conservation program. The sale of a conservation easement on the property enabled Gabby and Henry to purchase the land at agricultural value, making this investment affordable for them as first-time farm owners.

Working with their advisors, Intervale's Sam Smith and VLT's Maggie Donin, they completed the sale and became the proud owners of their forever farm in the fall of 2020. The duo also worked with Sam to build out their business plan. "The planning process gave us the confidence to bring our business plan to our lenders," Gabby shared. They also underscored that having a plan in place helped them adapt when COVID hit and they transitioned from a wholesale model to direct consumer sales through a CSA. They are continuing work with Sam to recalibrate and grow this new aspect of their operation.

WILSON FARM

GREENSBORO

LINDSAY & BRENDEN BEER

Lindsay & Brenden Beer launched Wilson Farm & Apothecary in 2015 with the goal of providing their community with local, organic, and high quality medicines and culinary herbs. In 2018, the Beers started leasing the former Hazendale Farm, a keystone producer and farm market in Greensboro for nearly 35 years. Through Vermont Land Trust (VLT)'s Farmland Access Program, the Beers were able to purchase the land affordably while ensuring it remains productive for future generations through the sale of a conservation easement. Critical funding to conserve and transition this farm from one generation to the next was provided by VHCB's Conservation Program, VLT, Greensboro Land Trust, and the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service.

Aiming to grow their business and become full-time producers, the Beers worked with the Viability Program to create a strong business plan to scale up herb production, extend their season with greenhouses, and revive the former farmstand to serve their community and provide a market for other local producers. Working with business advisor Daniel Keeney at the Center for an Agricultural Economy, they created a plan to make critical infrastructure investments, secured capital, developed a marketing strategy, and designed a new brand to propel them forward in their next phase.



"Farms strengthen local economies and make our state more resilient to climate change and food insecurity. Through the Viability Program, we've been able to access this land, open a CSA, and develop a farm stand in Granville. It's helped us build and become part of this community."

- Gabby Tuite & Henry Webb



"From the very beginning, we have wanted to create something that will have a lasting impact on the health and wellness of our greater community. We would not have been able to access this land, grow our business, and reach these goals without the support of VHCB and the Vermont Land Trust."

- Lindsay Beer

INVESTING IN WORKING LANDS OWNERS & STEWARDS:

TARGETED GRANT-MAKING

In addition to providing business planning and technical assistance, the Viability Program awards grants to help working lands enterprises implement their business plans, make on-farm improvements, and invest in their future. In 2020, our grant programs focused on improving water quality, environmental stewardship, supporting resilience and pandemic adaptations, and bringing business planning goals to fruition.

BUSINESS PLAN IMPLEMENTATION GRANTS

In FY20 the Viability Program awarded \$54,926 in Implementation Grants to 10 producers across the state to help bring key elements of their business plans from concept to reality. These grants leveraged an additional \$256,784 in farm funds and state or federal resources, a ratio of 4.7:1, resulting in \$311,710 in total business investments.

This funding has enabled producers to invest in infrastructure, equipment, and services, resulting in greater labor efficiency, expansion of markets, enhanced product quality, and increased resiliency. These grants also supported businesses adapting their models in response to the pandemic. (Full list of grantees on p.17)

\$54,926 IN IMPLEMENTATION GRANTS → **\$311,710** IN TOTAL BUSINESS INVESTMENTS

“We were in a unique position where our sales were increasing, but our business wasn’t doing well. Our labor was not efficient for the scale we wanted to reach. COVID pushed the issue, and a lot of the funding support was for patching instead of improving systems. This grant was about what we can do right now to make our businesses and communities more resilient. The Implementation Grant allowed us to increase cold storage, significantly improving the flow in the building and our ability to provide more food to our community.”

– Ashlyn Bristle, Rebop Farm, Brattleboro;
\$6,000 Implementation Grant for expanded cold storage



HONEY FIELD FARM

NORWICH

VALERIE WOODHOUSE & ELI HERSH

Honey Field Farm is a 25-acre family farm in Norwich managed by Valerie Woodhouse and Eli Hersh. Successors of the renowned Killdeer Farm, they produce organic vegetables, plant and flower starts, and farm-based specialty products. The team initially worked with the Viability Program to navigate the farm purchase and continued to work with the Intervale Center's Sam Smith and business consultant Rose Wilson in 2020 to build out their business plan and marketing strategy. Just as they began to ramp up production in their new location, COVID forced them to reorient their plans due to impacts on their direct and wholesale markets. With a strong understanding of their business and finances, they were able to respond by launching a delivery service. Awarded a \$4,000 Implementation Grant, they secured a van, allowing them to retain and expand markets while ensuring the most vulnerable members of their community could access nutritious foods through their home delivery program. With a focus on clear communication, highest standards of safety, and commitment to support community health, the pair completed a successful 2020 season.

"The Viability Program has been an asset and ally. We've greatly benefitted from our work with business advisors and consultants to help take our business to the next level. With additional support like this grant funding, we were able to take a leap to expand our business. This program assisted our farm in scaling up over 8 times from 2019 to 2020; a jump that requires investments in equipment like this delivery van to enable us to scale up at the rate we needed to support the overall farm. We cannot recommend this program enough to other farmers."

- Valerie Woodhouse, Honey Field Farm



STONY POND FARM

FAIRFIELD

MELANIE & TYLER WEBB

Melanie & Tyler Webb are first generation farmers who launched Stony Pond Farm in Fairfield in 2004. Managing an organic farm specializing in dairy and grass-fed beef, they've pursued innovative land stewardship systems and diversification since the beginning. With a history of collaborating with the Viability Program on farm planning and investments, they reached out for assistance when they decided to expand their artisan cheese enterprise. Working with Daniel Keeney at the Center for an Agricultural Economy and Rose Wilson, they focused on identifying capital, executing a funding plan, developing recipes with artisan-mentors, and creating a food safety plan. The Webbs were also assisted with a successful application to the Working Lands Enterprise Initiative, securing \$65,000 to build and equip the on-farm creamery. A \$6,000 VHCB Implementation Grant helped close the funding gap for the facility. "This project is an integral part of the future of our farm and will allow us to provide full-time employment opportunities," Melanie said. Along with continuing their farm incubation program to support future farmers, they will work with Organic Valley on research and development for innovative dairy products to benefit other producers.



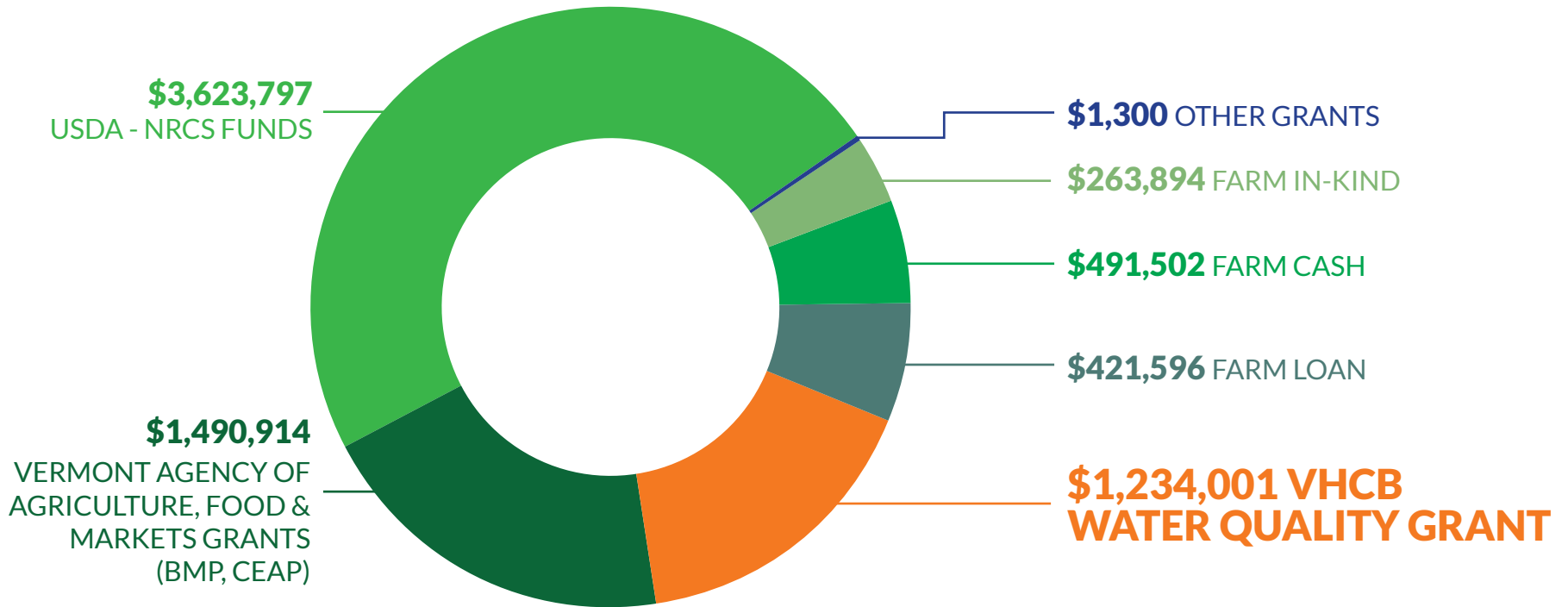
WATER QUALITY GRANTS

The Water Quality Grants Program, funded by the State of Vermont’s Capital Construction and Bonding Act, helps farmers make water quality related capital improvements to farm infrastructure. In FY2020, the Viability Program awarded \$1,234,001 in grants to 37 farms, leveraging nearly \$6.3M (a ratio of 5:1), to help farmers and the state meet their clean water goals. Grantees are located across the state, including in the Lake Champlain, Lake Memphremagog, and Connecticut River watersheds.

Water Quality Grants typically support farmers in paying for projects that state and federal grant programs cannot cover, or in some cases assist farmers with meeting the required match. VHCB grants complement other state investment, and are often paired with Vermont Agency of Agriculture grants like the Best Management Practices program and Capital Equipment Assistance Program, to complete large projects. Outcomes have included improvements in compliance with the Required Agricultural Practices, soil health, environmental stewardship, labor efficiency, and animal welfare. Grantees include a range of farms: dairy and livestock, small and large, organic and conventional. Since 2017, with funding from the State of Vermont’s Capital Construction and Bonding Act, VHCB’s Viability Program has awarded more than \$2.7M in Water Quality Grants. (FY20 grantees on p.17)

FUNDING SOURCES FOR FY20 PROJECTS

\$7,527,003 OF VHCB & LEVERAGED FUNDS



GRASS CATTLE CO.
CHARLOTTE
STEVE SCHUBART

“This investment not only creates labor efficiencies, but produces tremendous rewards for the land, soil, and wildlife habitats.”

– Steve Schubart

Growing up on his parent’s hobby farm in Vermont, Steve Schubart developed his love of animals and the working landscape at an early age. Working on a grass-fed beef ranch in California while pursuing a degree in Economics led him back to Vermont where he earned a degree in Diversified Agriculture & Dairy Herd Management. In 2016 he launched Grass Cattle Company, a beef operation doing what’s “good for the consumer, the cattle, and the land” through a strategy of rotational grazing. Now on his own land in Charlotte, Steve applied for a VHCB Water Quality Grant to invest in grazing infrastructure. Awarded an \$8,150 grant, Schubart will install laneways that allow frequent movement of cattle, reduce harm to the pasture, build organic soil matter, and store water to reduce runoff and support drought resistance. He has also worked with his local conservation district to install buffer fencing around riparian areas on the conserved property.



FAIRMONT FARM
EAST MONTPELIER
**CLARA AYER, RICHARD HALL, BONNIE HALL, RICKY HALL,
AND TUCKER PURCHASE**

“We realize that to farm now, and in the future, focusing on sustainability measures is crucial. We recognize that the land will not take care of us unless we take care of the land.”

– Clara Ayer

Fairmont Farm is a third-generation dairy farm in East Montpelier and Craftsbury owned and operated by Clara Ayer, Richard Hall, Bonnie Hall, Ricky Hall, and Tucker Purchase. According to Clara, their mission is to uphold the “utmost consideration for the safety and happiness of our people, the cleanliness of our environment, and the health of our animals.” Early adopters of no-till planting and cover-cropping techniques, Fairmont Farm has continued to enhance their management practices to improve water quality, nutrient management, and overall efficiencies. With a \$20,000 VHCB Water Quality Grant and matching funds from the farm and the Vermont Agency of Agriculture’s Capital Equipment Assistance Program, Fairmont Farm will be able to utilize innovative injection technology to apply manure more efficiently, reducing soil compaction and nutrient loss. Working with their local conservation district and Vermont Land Trust, they have also planted buffers along waterways and conserved more than 1,600 acres with public recreation trails.



2020 VIABILITY PROGRAM GRANT AWARDS

WATER QUALITY GRANTEES

Aires-Hill Farm, Berkshire*
\$40,000 for manure storage facility upgrade

Audy Farms, New Haven*
\$40,000 for a no-till planter

Bartholomew Brothers, Inc., Benson
\$40,000 to decommission a silage bunker

Bouchard Family Dairy, Franklin*
\$40,000 for a dragline manure application system

Bread and Butter Farm, Shelburne*
\$40,000 to revitalize grassland for regenerative grazing and protect wetland forests

Champlain Valley Farm, Addison*
\$40,000 for a manure storage facility

Chandler Pond Farm, Wheelock
\$40,000 for a winter feed yard and new manure storage

Chaput Family Farms, North Troy*
\$20,000 for a dragline manure application system

Clifford Farm, Starksboro*
\$16,497 for a manure pump to enable timely manure application

Dale and Alma Briggs, Addison*
\$33,147 for a vertical tillage seeder

Dry Brook Farm, LLC, Rutland
\$6,217 for a covered barnyard

Fairmont Farms, East Montpelier*
\$20,000 for a manure injection system

Foster Brothers Farm, Inc., Middlebury
\$40,000 for a manure vacuum truck

God's Country Farm, Holland*
\$40,000 for a waste management system

Gosliga Farm, Inc, Addison
\$40,000 to construct a new leachate pond

Grass Cattle Company, Charlotte*
\$8,154 to construct a new laneway

Hillside Homestead, Craftsbury
\$35,359 for a new barnyard

Homestead Farm, Fairfax
\$40,000 to construct manure management infrastructure

Iroquois Acres NWA, LLC, Bridport*
\$40,000 for a manure dragline injection system

J & L Dairy, Newport
\$20,339 for a new manure pump

Lanphear Family Farm, Hyde Park
\$40,000 to expand manure storage facility

Larson Farm & Creamery, Wells*
\$38,000 for a covered bedded pack barn

Longway Farms, Swanton*
\$18,000 for a manure injection toolbar

Maple Cedar View Farm, Derby
\$35,616 for a new manure pit and concrete barnyard

Mountain Meadows Farm, Sudbury*
\$40,000 for composting and manure stacking facilities

Newmont Farm, Bradford
\$31,425 for new manure storage

Peter and Lorie Hutchins, Enosburg Falls
\$16,300 for a wrapped round baler and silage leachate capture system

Pinello Farm, Randolph*
\$15,800 for a no-till seeder

Poulin & Daughters Family Farm, Randolph*
\$40,000 for a covered barnyard

Rail View Dairy, New Haven
\$40,000 for a no-till drill/seeder

Rolling Bale Farm LLC, Shoreham
\$39,147 for a bedded pack pole barn

Rusty John Farm, Addison*
\$40,000 for a round baler/wrapper

Sprague Ranch, LLC, Brookfield
\$40,000 for a new calf hutch enclosure

Stonewood Farm, Inc., Orwell*
\$40,000 for a road and bridge project to reduce erosion

Westminster Farm, Westminster Station
\$40,000 for a new bunker wall for manure storage

Winslow Farm, Charleston*
\$40,000 to upgrade manure storage and install a new barnyard

Wonder Why Farm, Cabot
\$40,000 for a new manure pit

BUSINESS PLAN IMPLEMENTATION GRANTEES

Aires-Hill Farm, Berkshire*
\$6,000 for a forage box

Bear Roots Farm, Barre & Williamstown*
\$4,800 for a commercial kitchen

Honey Field Farm, Norwich
\$4,000 for a farm delivery vehicle

Ice House Farm, Goshen
\$6,000 toward a milking parlor efficiency upgrade

Maple Valley Farm, Bridgewater
\$6,000 to equip new saffron, pumpkin, and hay enterprises

Meeting Place Pastures, Cornwall*
\$4,126 for sheep-handling equipment

Rebop Farm, Brattleboro
\$6,000 for a walk-in freezer upgrade

Sawyer Made, East Calais
\$4,000 for a shop renovation

Small Axe Farm, Barnet
\$6,000 for a solar installation

Stony Pond Farm, Enosburg Falls*
\$6,000 for a new on-farm creamery

* Indicates Conserved Property



CAPACITY BUILDING & CONNECTION:

STRENGTHENING RURAL COMMUNITIES

In 2020, the Viability Program expanded network development and capacity building efforts. Initiatives included facilitating greater collaboration among food hubs, providing capacity support and professional development for Vermont business assistance providers, developing a regional association of providers across the northeast US, and assisting Vermont's rural communities with accessing resources.

VERMONT FOOD HUB COLLABORATIVE

VHCB continues to support the development of the Vermont Food Hub Collaborative, assisting hubs to deepen partnerships, secure funding, and move food from all corners of the state to market. The Collaborative seeks to increase sales of local farm and food products in Vermont and regional markets, and includes the Center for an Agricultural Economy's Food Venture Center and Farm Connex enterprises in Hardwick; Food Connects in Brattleboro; Green Mountain Farm to School's Farm Direct in Newport; and the Intervale Center's Food Hub in Burlington.

The COVID-19 pandemic illustrated the critical role that food hubs play in connecting Vermont producers with market opportunities, as they adapted services and moved local products for farmers and producers whose markets shifted dramatically. Seeing similar demand increases as farms and farmstands, the food hubs launched community buying groups, new distribution routes to get products to farms with direct sales, and switched from delivering to schools and restaurants to new markets where Vermonters turned for food products. The pandemic has also required the food hubs to focus on safety within their internal operations while selling products in a rapidly changing marketplace.

Additionally, in 2020 hubs began to invest in developing a collective Vermont brand, which will support collective marketing and sales efforts in the future.



SCALING THE IMPACT OF FARM VIABILITY SERVICES:

DEVELOPING THE AGRICULTURAL VIABILITY ALLIANCE

To extend and strengthen business assistance to farm and food entrepreneurs across the northeast, the Viability Program is collaborating with other regional leaders to launch an association of business technical assistance programs and professionals. The **Agricultural Viability Alliance (AVA)**, previously known as The Blueprint, will advance professional and workforce development efforts, provide networking opportunities, and advocate for resources to ensure equitable access to high-quality business assistance for farm and food businesses across the region.



Awarded a \$624,060 grant by the Northern Border Regional Commission (NBRC) to advance this work, the Viability Program is supporting AVA capacity building, making awards to 8 entities and partnerships to expand the capacity of service providers in New England and New York's Hudson Valley. Awards will enable regional partners to provide business assistance to farm and food enterprises, with an emphasis on providing culturally competent business coaching for BIPOC and other historically underserved entrepreneurs. AVA and the activities funded below will close gaps in technical assistance across the region, supporting a more vibrant working landscape.

2020 AGRICULTURAL VIABILITY ALLIANCE AWARDS SUPPORTED BY VHCB:

Hudson Valley Agribusiness Development Corporation (HVADC) in partnership with GrowNYC: \$94,525 to support business and succession planning, farmland access, marketing, management coaching, and technical assistance with a focus on businesses owned by individuals from underserved populations—people of color, immigrants, LGBTQIA and low-income individuals and families – in Hudson Valley, NY.

Maine Organic Farmers & Grocers Association (MOFGA) in collaboration with Land for Good & Maine Farmland Trust: \$86,000 to coordinate workshops and one-on-one assistance on scaling up for wholesale markets as well as transfer and succession planning in Maine.

Center for an Agricultural Economy (CAE): \$17,543 to support small to medium-sized producers with business planning, value-added processing, access to financing and farmland access, food safety and regulatory compliance, and local supply chain development in northern New Hampshire.

Farm Credit East, ACA: \$20,930 to provide assistance with estate and retirement planning, family business transition, financial management, marketing, management coaching, and human resources in Maine, New Hampshire, and New York.

Northeast Organic Farming Association of Vermont (NOFA-VT) & Northeast Farmers of Color Land Trust (NEFOC): \$54,524 to provide business planning and land access assistance to farmers of color in Vermont.

University of New Hampshire - Cooperative Extension (UNHCE): \$23,335 to provide direct technical assistance to agricultural businesses and further the development of a professional cohort focused on farm finance.

Vital Communities in collaboration with Land for Good (LFG), New Hampshire Community Loan Fund (NHCLF) & National Center for Appropriate Technology (NCAT): \$63,139 to provide business and succession planning, whole farm planning, technical assistance, and growth readiness assessments to farms, with a focus on early stage businesses.

Yankee Farm Credit, ACA: \$30,000 to provide support with business and transfer planning, financial management, and marketing & sales for businesses outside traditional commodity markets, with a focus on young, beginning, small, and veteran producers in Vermont and New Hampshire.

RURAL ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT INITIATIVE (REDI)

Many small towns and businesses in rural Vermont are committed to making their communities more vibrant places to live, work, and play – coming together to envision possibilities and plan investments. However, access to funding remains a barrier due to lack of staff time, fundraising skills, or knowledge of funding available. The Rural Economic Development Initiative (REDI), created by the Legislature in 2017, helps bridge this gap by assisting communities and businesses with fundraising strategy and applying for grants. Priorities for REDI include value-added food and dairy processing, composting, outdoor recreation, and downtown revitalization. Funding is targeted to municipalities of 5,000 people or less.

In its third year, REDI supported 13 communities with strategic fundraising to carry out critical projects for their towns and businesses. Nine of the projects were awarded nearly \$1.4M in grants. REDI also assisted with feasibility plans in Rupert, Cabot, Pittsford, and Hardwick to guide future fundraising. Since REDI's inception, 27 communities have successfully secured grants totaling \$4.9M.



AGRICOLA & MONTI VERDI SALUMI PANTON

Agricola Farm is a diversified livestock farm in Panton where Alessandra Rellini, Stefano Pinna, and Bobby Brenna specialize in raising artisan meats. From Northern Italy, Alessandra began farming in Vermont in 2012. The farm has since grown into a multi-faceted business with a team committed to holistic practices that support the health of the animals, soil, and people. Recent expansion initiatives include a cured meats enterprise, Monti Verde Salumi, and the Vermont Pork Coalition, which will provide a premium market for other Vermont producers who could supply Monti Verde. To support this growth, REDI connected them with business planner and grant writer Rose Wilson to prepare a business plan, feasibility analysis, and application for a USDA Value Added Producer Grant. Awarded \$204,000, they will re-brand, launch a regional marketing campaign, and bring on critical staff. This will allow them to reach new markets and further their goals to create a successful business that benefits Vermont producers and the landscape.

"It was so helpful to work with Rose through the grant application process. Rose's help extends beyond the grant and has spurred us to create a stronger business plan that can guide us through growth and adversities."

– Ale Rellini, Agricola Farm & Monti Verdi Salumi



FY20 RURAL ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT INITIATIVE: FUNDED PROJECTS

Community Center in Bridgewater: The Bridgewater Area Community Foundation received REDI support that led to two successful grant awards from ACCD's Vermont Community Development Program (VCDP): A \$30,000 Planning Grant in 2019 and a \$400,000 Implementation Grant in 2020 to redevelop a retired school building into a community center with childcare and space for local businesses

Agricultural innovation in Worcester: Peaceful Harvest Mushrooms, a current client in VHCB's Farm & Forest Viability Program, received support to apply to USDA Rural Development's Value Added Producer Grant. They secured \$39,507 to increase production and sales of their locally produced medicinal products.

General store in East Calais: When Calais Store on Route 14 in East Calais was shuttered, a local nonprofit quickly formed to save this local economic hub. The East Calais Community Trust accessed \$105,000 in Northern Border Regional Commission funds, as well as \$75,000 in ACCD tax credit funding, enabling the Trust to renovate and reopen the store.

High-speed internet in the NEK: The NEK Community Broadband Communications Union District formed in 2020 to address the critical need to bring affordable, high-speed internet options to the Northeast Kingdom. Two successful grant applications will kick this project off: \$60,000 from the Vermont Dept. of Public Service Broadband Innovation Grant for a feasibility study and business plan, and a \$60,000 USDA Rural Business Development Grant for network layout design.

Community library in Brandon: The Town of Brandon secured a \$30,000 VCDP planning grant to develop a design for the revitalization of a historic building housing its public library. The renewed library will be fully accessible, provide critical technology, and offer a welcoming space for community activities.

JENNA'S PROMISE JOHNSON

In 2018, the Morrisville Copley Hospital identified mental health issues and substance use/abuse as one of the most critical health issues facing the county. A major barrier to successful recovery is access to supportive housing, and this was the context in which Jenna's Promise, a Johnson-based nonprofit, formed to help women in recovery. REDI supported Jenna's Promise with their application to the Vermont Community Development Program (VCDP). Awarded \$300,000 to renovate and remodel an abandoned building in Johnson, the project will create a Recovery Residence and employ those overcoming opioid addiction in a community café and roastery on site. The VCDP grant will help leverage other funding sources to bring this critical project to fruition.

"Working with Diane Meyerhoff through the REDI program has been such a great partnership! We could not have gotten the Vermont Community Development Program Planning Grant and would not be where we are now without the assistance we received through REDI. We are moving ahead toward achieving our goals and bringing this critical resource to the community."

– Amy Tatro, Jenna's Promise

Agri-Cultural center in Charlotte: Clemmons Family Farm is one of 0.4% of farms in the United States that are African-American owned, and is a site along Vermont's African-American Heritage Trail. The farm hosts an arts and cultural center showcasing Black artists. Clemmons Family Farm is developing new agricultural and culinary heritage programming, and was awarded a \$5,000 Ben & Jerry's Foundation Grant to build additional farm infrastructure. REDI also assisted the farm in accessing a highly competitive ArtPlace America grant in 2017.

Recovery center and community space in Johnson: REDI supported Jenna's Promise, a community nonprofit, with an application to the VCDP. Jenna's Promise received \$300,000 to transform an abandoned building in Johnson into a Recovery Residence as well as a café and roastery to employ those overcoming opioid addiction.

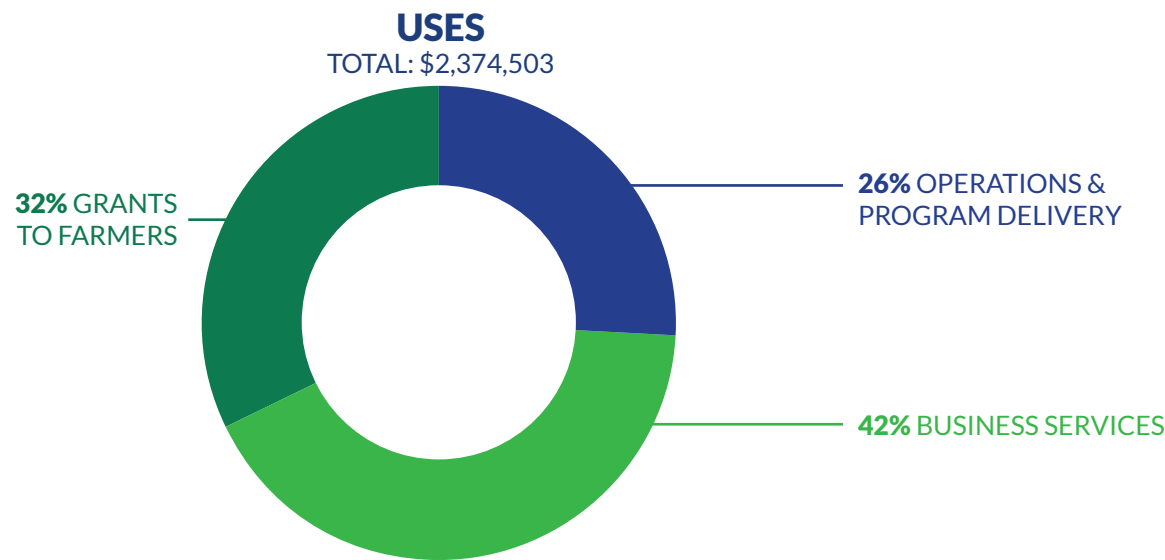
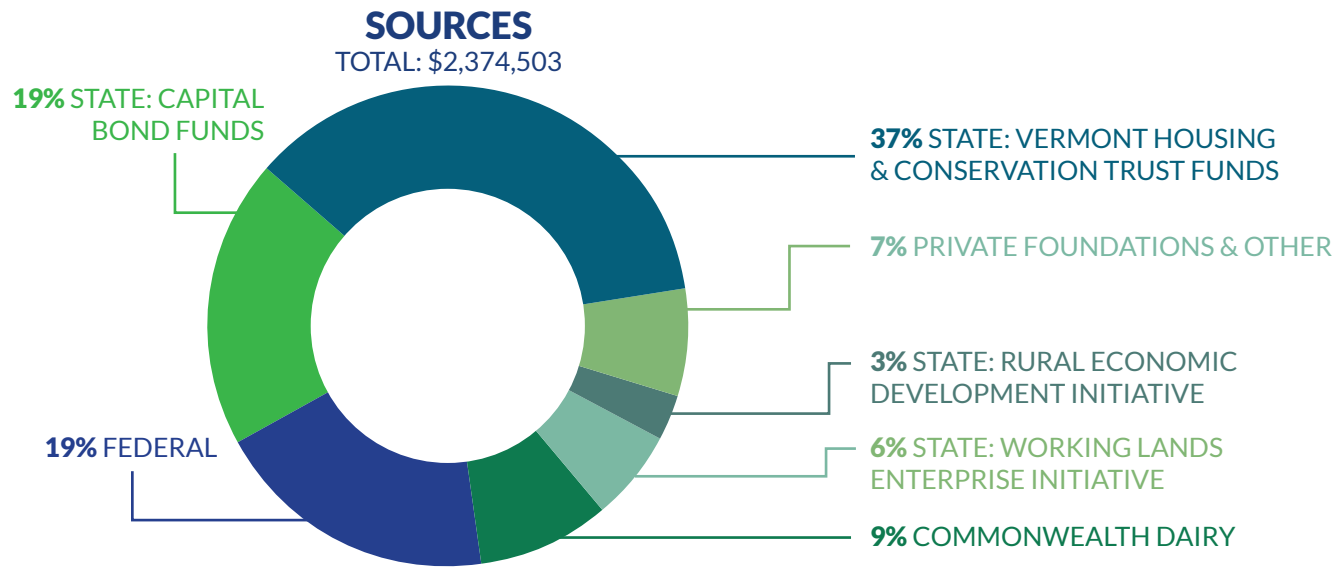
Farm and artisanal meat processing in Panton: With assistance through REDI, Agricola Meats was awarded a \$204,098 USDA Value Added Producer Grant to support a marketing campaign to grow from producing 70 pounds of salami per month to 1,400 pounds, which will significantly increase local sourcing of meat for the cured product.

Dairy and creamery in Glover: Sweet Rowen Farmstead is a dairy and creamery in the Northeast Kingdom run by Paul Lisai, a farmer with a focus on water quality and grass-based agriculture. Sweet Rowen secured a \$114,043 USDA Value Added Producer Grant to invest in its bottled milk, cheese, and yogurt lines and access new markets in Vermont as well as Massachusetts and New York metro areas.



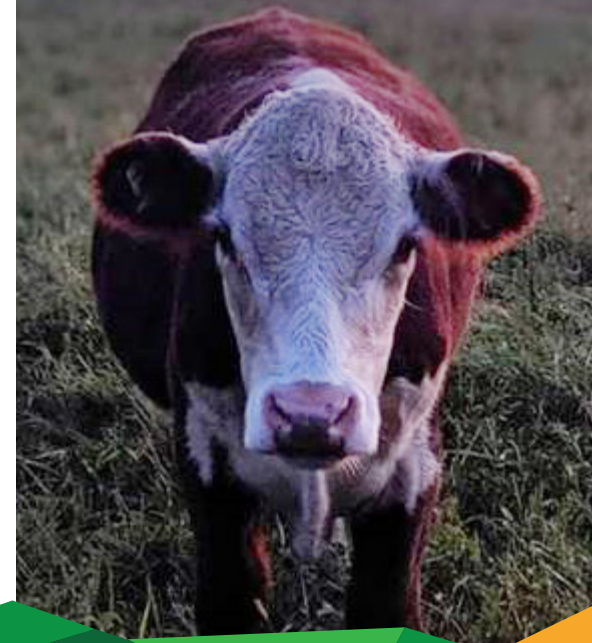
VIABILITY PROGRAM FINANCIAL ACTIVITIES – FY2020

In FY20 the Viability Program expended \$2.3 million, 35% coming from federal and private funding sources.



The Vermont Farm & Forest Viability Program is funded by the State of Vermont through the Vermont Housing & Conservation Board. In FY20 the Viability Program also received funding from USDA Rural Development, VT Working Lands Enterprise Board, Northern Border Regional Commission, USDA Beginning Farmer and Rancher Development Program, CARES Act Coronavirus Relief Fund, Commonwealth Dairy, Vermont Community Foundation, High Meadows Fund, and the Sustainable Future Fund.

This report is produced by the Vermont Housing & Conservation Board, in collaboration with the Vermont Agency of Agriculture, Food and Markets, pursuant to 6 V.S.A. § 4710(f) & 10 V.S.A. § 325m.



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Back cover: Clockwise: Ben DeFlorio, Micah LeMasters, Steve Schubart, Corey Hendrickson

"I feel more focused and that my goals are achievable. I am looking at things differently and not stressing so much. The program has helped put so much in perspective and I am looking forward to using this document and the process for many years to come."

~ Caroline Persson, Keep it Real Organics, Jamaica



"Besides all of the technical assistance, we were able to sit down and take a look at the reality of the future of our farm. Those conversations, guided by the knowledge of our advisor, helped us immensely."

~Teresa Janiszyn, Pete's Stand, Rockingham



"Chris Lindgren was extremely helpful with the financial analysis of my business plan. These services had an extremely strong impact in helping me achieve business goals."

~ Heath Bunnell, Kirby Mulch, Kirby





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Vermont Farm & Forest



Viability Program

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