A LETTER TO LEGISLATORS

Dear Members of the General Assembly,

Against the backdrop of another unprecedented year, 2023 marked a significant milestone – the 20th anniversary of the Vermont Farm & Forest Viability Program. As we reflect on and celebrate the accomplishments of this program, we have also been responding to one of the most challenging growing seasons since this program began.

Starting with May's frost and continuing with persistent wet weather throughout the year, disastrous flooding in July and August, and economic uncertainties tied to inflation, land prices, labor shortages, and ongoing supply chain disruptions, our working lands businesses have persevered through unprecedented challenges. They continue to be leaders in our state's efforts to mitigate and adapt to climate change through building strong rural communities, stewarding the working landscape, and pioneering practices that serve as a model for the broader agricultural and forestry sectors.

For two decades, the Vermont Farm & Forest Viability Program has remained steadfast in its commitment to support these businesses. We are focused on addressing their needs for survival while providing the resources, guidance, and empowerment necessary for them to thrive and adapt well into the future. With the support of state and federal funding in FY2023, the Viability Program supported 95 businesses to strengthen their financial management skills, enhance business profitability, and respond to flooding. In addition to our one-on-one working lands business support, the Viability Program actively contributes to supporting Vermont's working landscape through other state-funded initiatives:

- Our Water Quality Grants program supported 22 new projects aimed at improving agricultural water quality.
- In 2023, the Rural Economic Development Initiative aided 48 communities and businesses, 17 of whom have secured more than \$8.4M in awards so far.
- Our forest landowner program has been launched to connect private landowners with a support network to develop intergenerational transfer plans.

We extend our sincere appreciation for your steadfast partnership in strengthening our communities and preserving our working landscape.

Sincerely,

Executive Director Gustave Seelig Vermont Housing & Conservation Board

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Secretary Anson Tebbetts Vermont Agency of Agriculture, Food & Markets

Commissioner Danielle Fitzko Vermont Dept. of Forests, Parks & Recreation

VERMONT FARM & FOREST VIABILITY PROGRAM



Housing & Conservation Board

OUR MISSION

Our mission is to enhance the economic viability of Vermont farm, food and forest products enterprises.

The Vermont Farm & Forest Viability Program, a program of the Vermont Housing & Conservation Board (VHCB), advances Vermont's working lands economy. We support farm and forest producers with developing business plans and improving financial viability, help farms and rural communities access much-needed federal funding for economic development projects, and combat forest fragmentation through long-term planning for forest landowners. These initiatives complement VHCB's investments in housing, conservation, and historic preservation that enhance quality of life across Vermont.



BUSINESS PLANNING FOR SUCCESS

95 farm, food, and forestry enterprises across over 70 Vermont towns developed long-term plans while building skills in financial management and business planning. On average, clients increased their gross sales by \$64,000 and their net profit by \$11,000 during enrollment.



FLOOD RESILIENCE

Supported working lands businesses in short-term emergency response from flooding and frost, and longterm business planning with climate adaptation in mind

GRANT PROGRAMS

38 grants, totaling nearly \$900,000 and leveraging over \$4.5 million, were awarded to farm, food, and forest businesses to increase production, adapt to climate change, and meet clean water goals.

RURAL ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

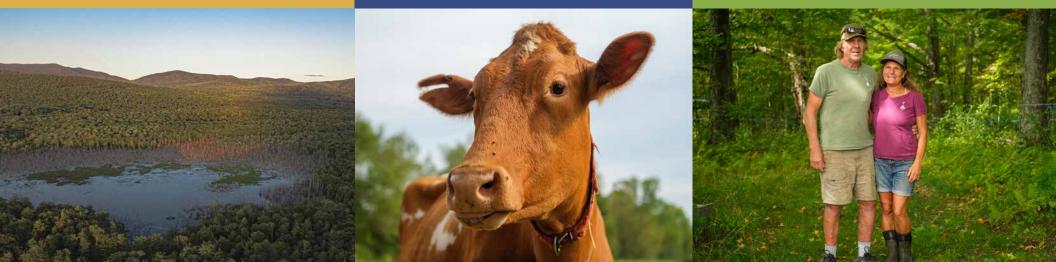
REDI funds provided grant-writing and planning services to 48 rural municipalities and businesses, resulting in \$8.4 M in leveraged funds.



94% of farm transfer planning clients reported that their business will continue as a result of participating in the Viability Program.

FOREST HEALTH & CONNECTIVITY

Expanded programming launched in 2023 will reach over 500 forest landowners with land transfer education and one-onone transfer planning support to combat forest fragmentation.

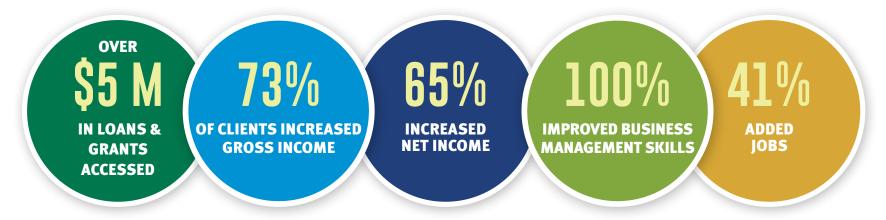


BUSINESS PLANNING

Over the last 20 years, the Vermont Farm & Forest Viability Program has worked to ensure that farm and forest businesses have the resources to thrive in an ever-changing climate and economy. Enrolled businesses benefit from extensive one-on-one coaching to meet long-term goals and address short-term challenges, gain business management and marketing skills, access affordable land and financing, and improve production. After the devastating flooding in July, Viability Program advisors swiftly aided affected businesses in pivoting production and accessing recovery resources. Extreme weather in 2023 highlights the need to prioritize climate resiliency alongside economic resiliency.

The Vermont Farm & Forest Viability Program is a network structure, where VHCB collaborates with skilled advisors at partner organizations to deliver a common program model, including the Center for an Agricultural Economy, The Intervale Center, Land for Good, The Northeast Organic Farming Association of Vermont, and The University of Vermont Extension. In 2023, the Viability Program also supported farmer assistance provided by the Vermont Land Trust, Northeast Farmers of Color Land Trust, Food Connects, and Healthy Roots.

In Fiscal Year 2023, over 220 farm, food, and forest enterprises worked with the Viability Program, and 95 received in-depth support (see p.12 for a map of FY23 participants). These businesses sustain an estimated 316 jobs (FTEs) and generate over \$36.1M in annual gross sales.



"Now that we have a clear path forward, my stress level has gone way down. I have much more free time to spend with my family and I've been able to get to my grandkids' ball games."

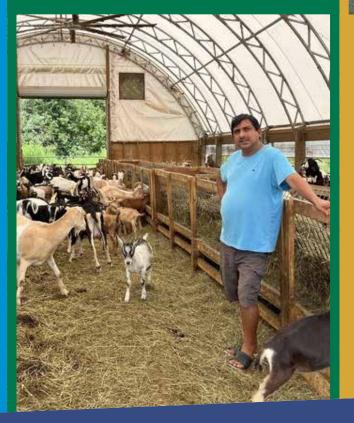
~Dave Pierson

Pierson Farm, Bradford

Pierson Farm has been in the same family since 1946. As Dave began to near retirement age, he looked to the Viability Program to assist with transferring the business and farm ownership to his long-time employee, Dan Bartlett. With the support of their advisor, Mike Ghia of Land For Good, Dave and Dan have a fully developed plan for the future of the farm and have updated their financial workbooks with the support of Gina Simmons of the Intervale Center.

Dhaurali Goats, Colchester

Before arriving in Vermont from Bhutan in 2009, Chuda Dhaurali was a goat farmer. After working in the restaurant industry, Chuda and Gita leased Pine Island Farm in Colchester from the Vermont Land Trust to launch their goat meat business in 2013. As their business grew, they enrolled in the Viability Program and, with support from their NOFA-VT advisor, Bill Cavanaugh, Gita & Chuda wrote a business plan, grant applications, and navigated the USDA slaughter regulations. In 2023, they were able to purchase the land and build their own USDA-certified slaughter facility.



"It's been so reassuring. It's easy to feel isolated, but they've helped me find a path forward and motivated me to keep going."

~Hannah Pearce

Hillside Farm, Glover

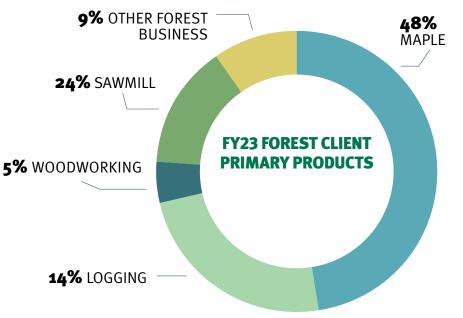
BillandHannahPearce, afather-daughter duo, run Hillside Farm. Since 1976, Hillside has hosted various agricultural activities and community events, and today, they specialize in pastured poultry and on-farm processing. With their help from advisors Daniel Keeney and Silene DeCiucies at the Center for an Agricultural Economy, Hannah improved the farm's business plan, raised prices, and ensured financial sustainability for the business, employees, and future farm transfer.

SUSTAINING VERMONT'S FORESTS

FOREST BUSINESS PLANNING

Vermont's forests are integral to our quality of life and to the state's climate solutions. To support the state's forested landscape and network of forest product entrepreneurs, the VT Farm & Forest Viability Program has offered business planning and technical assistance to forest products businesses since 2015. Today, over a third of clients are participating in the forest economy as their primary or secondary enterprise, including maple sugaring. To address the needs and challenges unique to forest businesses, the Viability Program funds a network of advisors to create business plans, analyze cash flow projections, and identify bottlenecks or possible management and enterprise changes to increase profitability.







Gagnon Lumber, Pittsford

Gagnon Lumber in Pittsford mills hardwood and softwood for diverse markets, including local outlets. Ken Gagnon enrolled in the Vermont Farm & Forest Viability Program for assistance with transitioning the business to the next generation.



FORESTLAND SUCCESSION PLANNING

Vermont's forests are crucial for wildlife habitat, water quality and stormwater management, and climate adaptation and mitigation. However, we are seeing increasing rates of fragmentation in Vermont as privately owned forests are converted to developed parcels. Since 2016, in collaboration with the Vermont Woodlands Association and Vermont Coverts, the Vermont Farm and Forest Viability Program has reached 115 forest landowners with land transfer education that aims to reduce forest fragmentation. In 2023, with \$150,000 from the U.S. Forest Service and \$417,000 in VHCB funds, this successful program expanded with six organizational partners. Over the next two years, over 500 Vermont landowners will receive support.

VERMONT COVERTS – WOODLANDS FOR WILDLIFE, a leader in forest stewardship, land transfer guidance, and wildlife-focused landowner education, will reach 160 landowners.

ENVIRONMENTAL MEDIATION CENTER will support 40 landowners with planning services, including family mediation. The EMC provides agricultural land transfer support, and facilitates agricultural and environmental issues in four states.

REDSTART NATURAL RESOURCE MANAGEMENT will work directly with six landowners. Redstart has extensive experience in working with landowners on a wide range of land management strategies.

VERMONT NATURAL RESOURCES COUNCIL will educate 100 new Vermont landowners through technical support around forest land stewardship. VNRC has effectively worked on land and environmental protection in Vermont for 60 years.

VERMONT WOODLANDS ASSOCIATION, the primary forest landowner support organization in the state, will provide over 200 landowners and natural resource professionals with transfer planning services and education with their proven and comprehensive services.

RJ TURNER COMPANY will use their background in forest management, land conservation, carbon credits, and land-use planning to directly support three forest landowners.

GRANT PROGRAMS

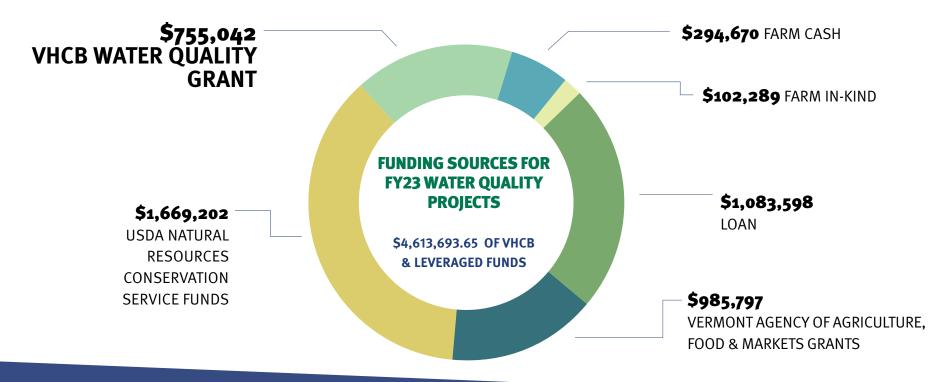
In 2023, the VT Farm & Forest Viability Program made grant awards to 38 working lands entrepreneurs totaling \$897,607. Given the extreme weather in 2023, these grants will support businesses progress towards their goals despite significant financial losses.

WATER QUALITY GRANTS

In 2023, 22 farmers were awarded \$755,041.50 to invest in on-farm capital improvements that enhance water quality. These projects will reduce runoff, improve soil health, and ultimately support the long-term success of farm enterprises. VHCB's Water Quality Grants, funded through the State's Capital Budget with ARPA funds, complement investments from the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) and Vermont Agency of Agriculture, Food & Markets (VAAFM). Since 2017, the program has awarded more than \$4.3 million in Water Quality Grants.

BUSINESS PLAN IMPLEMENTATION GRANTS

These grants are designed to help recent graduates of our business planning program implement key projects defined through their planning process, with a focus on increasing local working lands production and mitigating and/or adapting to climate change. In 2023, we made 16 awards totaling \$142,559 to working lands businesses including livestock, dairy, and diversified produce farms, food processors, and forest products businesses.





"The new hay merger cut harvesting time in half, there is higher digestibility in this year's feed, and we're seeing lower fuel costs and a shorter harvest time. Without this grant, we would not have been able to purchase this piece of equipment."

~Peter Rainville

Four Girls' Dairy, Fairfax

Peter Rainville, owner of Four Girls Dairy, comes from a long line of dairy farmers and deeply values his farm's landscape. He's part of Ben & Jerry's Caring Dairy program, collaborates with UVM Extension on crop and soil health research, plants black walnut trees, and preserves natural areas. In 2023, he used a Water Quality Grant to fund the purchase of a hay merger, allowing him to grow and harvest more of his cow's own feed, and reducing imported nutrients.

Severy Farm, Cornwall

Severy Farm is a 100% grass-fed organic dairy, milking 55 jersey cows. After completing a successful transfer of the farm from Nate's dad in 2021, Nate and Kerianne Severy knew it was time to update their infrastructure to better suit their scale and land. In 2022, they quickly moved into action and built a pit to store their milk house and barnyard waste with the support of a VHCB Water Quality Grant and funds from the VT Agency of Agriculture's Best Management Program.



"The new pit has been a huge improvement to our operation. We're capturing our on-farm nutrients and it's made a substantial impact on our farm's water quality, especially during a summer this wet."



Mama's Farm, Williston

Theogene and Hyacinthe Ayingene worked in agriculture in their home country of Rwanda before raising meat birds for the New American market at the Pine Island Community Farm in Colchester. After 8 years there, they recognized a need to find their own property to purchase. They began working with Vermont Farm & Forest Viability Program advisor, Sam Smith of the Intervale Center, who supported them in their land search. In 2022, they purchased a property in Williston.

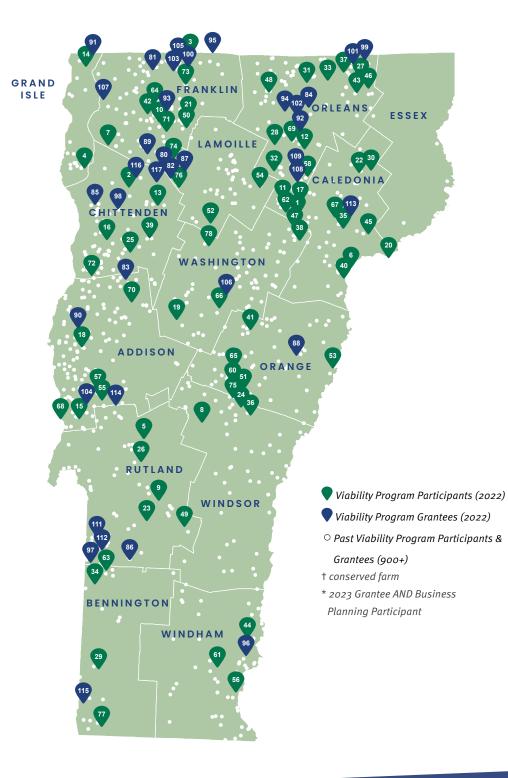
VERMONT FARM & FOREST VIABILITY PROGRAM PARTICIPANTS

- 1. Ackermann Dairy, Hardwick
- 2. Adams Turkey Farm, Westford
- 3. Aires-Hill Farm, Enosburg
- 4. Allenholm Farm, South Hero
- 5. Baird Farm, Chittendent
- 6. Barnet Mountain Meats, Barnet
- 7. Bearded Ladies Goat Farm, Georgia
- 8. Birdsong Farm, Stockbridge
- 9. Blume Vermont, Shrewsbury
- 10. Branon Family Maple Orchards, Fairfield
- 11. Bridgman Hill Dairy, Hardwick
- 12. Browns Custom Meat Processing, Glovert
- 13. Chamberlin's Garden and Farm Market, Underhill
- 14. Champlain Islands Nursery, Alburgh
- 15. Cher-Mi Farm, Orwell
- 16. Chrysalis LandWorks, Shelburnet
- 17. Clair-A-Den Farm, Hardwick
- 18. Clark Logging, Addison
- 19. Cloud Water Farm, Warrent
- 20. Crooked Mile Cheese, Waterford
- 21. Crossroad Maple, Bakersfield
- 22. Don-Sim Farm, Sutton†
- 23. Fern Hill Farm, Wallingford
- 24. Four Springs Farm, Royalton
- 25. Full Branch Tree Care, Hinesburg
- 26. Gagnon Lumber, Pittsford

- 27. Gods Country Farm, Holland†
- 28. Goodridge Lumber, Albany
- 29. Grateful Morning Farm, Shaftsburyt
- 30. Hauskaa, Burke
- 31. JASA Family Farm, Newport Town†
- 32. Jones Farm, Craftsbury
- 33. LePage's Rising Sun Farm, Newport City
- 34. Lewisholm Valley Farm, Pawlet
- 35. Little Lynn Farm, Danville
- 36. Luna Bleu Farm, Royalton
- 37. Maple Grove Farm, Derby
- 38. Maple Lane Farm, Cabot
- 39. Maple Wind Farm, Richmond
- 40. Maplemont Farm, Barnet
- 41. Martin Family Farm, Williamstown
- 42. Moo Acres Farm, Fairfieldt
- 43. Morgan Mapleworks, Morgan
- 44. Morse Brook Farm, Westminstert
- 45. NEK Grains, Waterford
- 46. New Venture Farm, Morgan
- 47. Northwind Farm, Waldent
- 48. O'Donnell Farm, Westfield
- 49. Papa John's Sugar Shack, Mount Holly
- 50. Peaked Hill View Farm, Bakersfield
- 51. Pembrook Heritage Farm, Randolph
- 52. Percy Farm, Stowe
- 53. Pierson Farm, Bradford

- 54. Sandiwood Farm, Wolcott
- 55. Scholten Farm, Whiting†
- 56. Scott Farm Orchard, Dummerston
- 57. Severy Farm, Cornwall
- 58. Shat Acres Farm, Greensboro
- 59. Shat Acres Highland Cattle, Greensboro
- 60. Silloway Maple, Randolph
- 61. Slipstream Farm, Newfane
- 62. Snug Valley Farm, Hardwick
- 63. Southwind Farm, Rupert
- 64. St Rocks Farm, Fairfield
- 65. Stargrazer Farm/Liberty Orchard, Randolph
- 66. Sugar Feather Farm, Berlin
- 67. Sunday Bell Farm, Danville
- 68. Swallowdale Farm, Orwellt
- 69. Sweet Rowen Farmstead, Glover
- 70. The Russell Farm, Starksboro
- 71. Trudell Family Farm, Fairfield†
- 72. Unity Farm, Charlotte
- 73. Vermont Natural Forest Products, Enosburg
- 74. Vermont Woodworking School, Cambridge
- 75. White Rocks Farm & Lumber, Randolph
- 76. Wild Woods Maple, Cambridge
- 77. Wildstone Farm, Pownal
- 78. Woodards Farm, Waterburyt
- 79. Woodlawn Farmstead, Pawlett





VERMONT FARM & FOREST VIABILITY PROGRAM GRANTEES

- 80. Boyden Farm, Cambridge
- 81. Bridgeman View Farm, Franklint
- 82. Bryce Farms Inc, Cambridge
- 83. Cobble Creek Nursery, Bristol*
- 84. Cornerstone Dairy, Irasburg†
- 85. Dhaurali Goats, Colchester*
- 86. Dorset Peak Livestock, Danbyt *
- 87. Endless Tracks, Cambridge*
- 88. Fort Waite Farm, Corinth*
- 89. Four Girls Dairy, Fairfax
- 90. Gevry Firewood, Addison*
- 91. Henry Bros Wolf Ridge Dairy , Alburgh
- 92. Hillside Farm, Albanyt *
- 93. Hunger Moon Farm, Enosburg*
- 94. John & Tammy Thibeault Farm, Irasburg†
- 95. L.F. Hurtubise & Sons, Richford
- 96. Leaping Bear Farm, Putney*
- 97. Levy Lamb, Pawlet*
- 98. Mama Farm, Williston*
- 99. Maple Cedar View, Derby*
- 100. McGarry Dairy, Enosburg
- 101. Morin Farm, Holland
- 102. Nelson Farms, Irasburg
- 103. Rainville Brothers Dairy, Enosburg
- 104. Richville Farms, Shoreham
- 105. Riverview Dairy, Franklin
- 106. Rogers Farmstead, Berlin
- 107. Sanders VI, Swanton
- 108. Sawmill Brook Farm, Greensboro
- 109. Shadagee Farm, Craftsbury
- 110. Stella 14 Wines, Cambridge*
- 111. SVT Farm, Wells
- 112. Sykes Hollow Land & Livestock, Pawlet
- 113. Sylvain Farm, St. Johnsbury
- 114. Taconic End Dairy, Leicester
- 115. The Goat Project, Bennington*
- 116. Trout Lily Forestry Services, Westford*
- 117. VT Vineyards, Underhill*

RURAL ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT INITIATIVE

The Rural Economic Development Initiative (REDI) helps Vermont's small communities access complex funding sources to advance working lands enterprises, support community revitalization, and expand outdoor recreation opportunities. Limited fundraising expertise and staff capacity can be a barrier for small towns, and REDI helps bridge this gap by providing grant writing consulting and technical assistance. Need for this programming has increased dramatically after the pandemic and recent catastrophic flooding. With support from the Legislature, USDA Rural Development, and a new award from the VT Agency of Administration, REDI has expanded and 2023 was the program's largest year to date. We assisted 48 communities and businesses, 17 of whom have secured more than \$8.3M in awards so far.

2023 was REDI's largest year to date. We assisted 48 communities and businesses, 17 of whom have secured more than \$8.3M in awards so far. Since REDI's inception, 68 communities have successfully secured grants totaling more than \$18.8 million.



WATER INFRASTRUCTURE, NORTH HERO

Economic development opportunities in North Hero have been constrained by water line failures, putting businesses in the village core at risk of severe losses during repairs. With support from REDI, the Town secured a \$1M Northern Border Regional Commission (NBRC) grant to complete the first phase of water line replacement, enabling the village to develop a resilient water system to support future growth.

"Having the connection to a consultant with expertise in this grant was so critical. We wouldn't have known who to reach out to for help without REDI and wouldn't have submitted such a competitive application without this support. This grant will provide the security businesses need to grow sustainably and benefit the community." – Corinn Julow, Town of North Hero

MAPLEBROOK FARM, NORTH BENNINGTON

With a 20 year history of producing artisanal cheese from Vermont milk, the team at Maplebrook Farm was determined to make a significant investment in a sustainable future. Working with REDI, they successfully earned a \$504,132 Northeast Dairy Business Innovation Center grant to implement a rapid, efficient cooling system for their mozzarella, drastically reducing water use and improving quality. This investment will not only support access to new markets and profitability, but shrink their environmental footprint and improve long-term business resilience.

"In dairy, there's never a budget for equipment improvements that are forward thinking vs putting out fires. We've never applied for a grant, and this would've been too daunting without a strong team to help us. This grant will get us to a stage in one year that would've taken 5+...the impact is hard to put into words." – Alex Englert, Maplebrook Farm



\$800,000 > \$18,853,578

REDI FUNDS SINCE 2017

GRANTS TO COMMUNITIES

(LEVERAGED 22:1; \$277,258 AWARD AVG.)

FUNDED PROJECTS IN 2023

Abenaki Community Center in Swanton Village: \$500,000 Northern Border Regional Commission (NBRC) grant and a \$53,500 Vermont Community Development Program (VCDP) grant to the Maquam Bay of Missisquoi to renovate and expand their tribal headquarters and community center.

Pedestrian Connectivity, Hardwick: A\$200,000 Downtown Transportation Fund grant will help develop a new, ADA accessible pedestrian bridge in downtown Hardwick, completing the Hardwick Downtown Loop of the Lamoille Valley Rail Trail.

Town Growth Center Expansion in Highgate: \$1.54M Economic Development Administration grant for Water/Wastewater Infrastructure.

Critical Infrastructure in Wilmington: \$753,510 Community Recovery & Resilience Program award and \$1M from NBRC to support a new water and wastewater system.

Specialty Crop Market Expansion, Craftsbury: \$47,000 Specialty Crop Block Grant to Myers Produce to improve increase sales of Vermont specialty crops in the northeast.

Growing the Outdoor Recreation Economy, Newport: \$92,000 USDA Rural Business Development Grant to Newport City Downtown Development.

Business Growth, North Hero: \$1M NBRC award to North Hero to support water infrastructure for local businesses.

Advancing the Forest Economy, Bristol: \$157,951 Working Lands ARPA Primary Producer grant to Bissonnette Firewood to upgrade their kiln and drying equipment to increase production of value-added firewood.

Expanding Beef Production, Cambridge: \$133,609 Working Lands ARPA Primary Producer grant to Boyden Farm to grow their business and meet the needs of a transitioning dairy/beef industry. **Resilient Forest Management, Bradford:** \$70,000 Working Lands ARPA Primary Producer grant to Redstart, Inc. to increase supply of native trees for stream buffering, improving water quality, timber production, habitat, and wetland restoration.

Farmworker Housing, Franklin: Riverview Farm will utilize a \$171,649 Working Lands ARPA Primary Producer grant, along with funding from VHCB and Champlain Housing Trust, to build a net zero, efficient home for their employees, advancing Vermont's housing, energy, and farming with dignity goals.

Poultry Processing, Orwell: \$66,300 Working Lands ARPA Primary Producer grant to Stonewood Farm to modernize facility and expand turkey production.

Pasture-Raised Meat, Richmond: \$250,000 USDA Value-Added Producer Grant to Maple Wind Farm to improve slaughter, processing, and packaging infrastructure.

Community Support Services, Cabot: \$83,000 USDA Community Facilities Grant to Neighbors in Action to acquire a building to provide community and social services as well as expand their food shelf.

Childcare Expansion, Randolph: \$1.7M USDA Loan to Green Mountain Economic Development Corporation Orange County Parent-Child Center to develop childcare center.

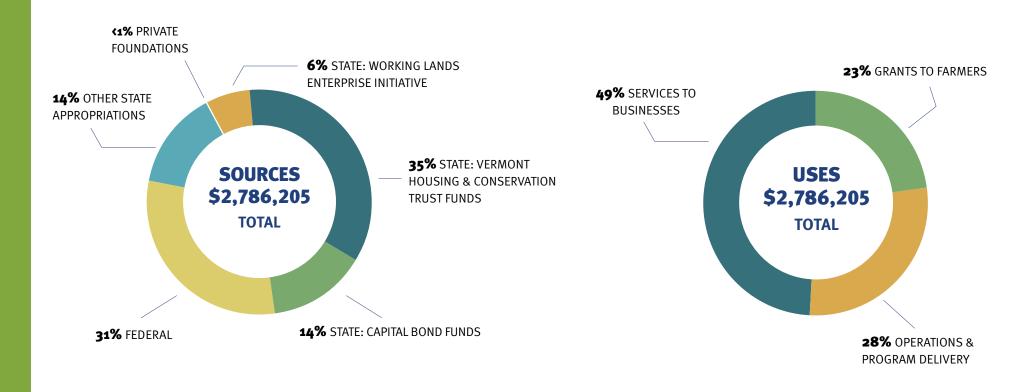
Milk Processing Expansion, N. Bennington: \$504,132 Dairy Business Innovation Center (DBIC) grant to Maplebrook Farm (merged with Ploughgate Creamery) to increase yield and their ability to process more fluid milk.

Goat Dairy Expansion, Goshen: \$97,850 DBIC grant to Ice House Farm to expand their farmstead goat dairy cheese processing capacity by purchasing and installing a custom designed cheese aging system.

VERMONT FARM & FOREST VIABILITY PROGRAM FINANCIAL ACTIVITIES – FY2023

In FY23 the Viability Program expended \$2.78 million, 30.6% coming from federal and private funding sources. The Vermont Farm & Forest Viability Program is funded through the Vermont Housing & Conservation Board. In FY23, the Viability Program also utilized funding from the US Economic Development Administration, USDA Rural Development, Northern Border Regional Commission, Vermont Working Lands Enterprise Board, Vermont Community Foundation, US Small Business Administration, and the United States Forest Service.

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



VERMONT FARM & FOREST VIABILITY

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Vermont Housing & Conservation Board

VERMONT FARM & FOREST VIABILITY PROGRAM