

# Bennington Veterans Incubator Farm

## Project Purpose:

This proposal will outline a strategy for maximizing the impact of the funds made available to the Vermont Veterans Home through the Bennington Fair Food Initiative. We formulated the strategy with the objective of minimizing the programmatic burdens and liability concerns of the VVH through the formation of a Veteran Incubator Farming Cooperative. The Cooperative would be awarded seed capital from the allocated funds and a free lease on 12 acres of the VVH campus and two storage buildings to begin re-establishing a working farm on the leased acreage.

By utilizing the awarded funds as seed capital to plan and establish the necessary legal and physical infrastructure required for long term success on this leased land the Cooperative will be able to leverage significant additional funds through Federal and State cost share programs, grants, and financing options that can magnify the volume of financial capital available for the implementation of the program and establish a strong foundation for continued viability.

The goal of this initiative is to meet the objectives outlined in the Congressionally Directed Spending Earmark for the Bennington Fair Food Initiative to:

1. Create a more thoroughly connected Farm and Food system

We seek to meet this objective by centering the focus of the Cooperative becoming a Farm to Institution Accelerator. The Cooperative will seek working partnerships with institutional buyers within a 50 mile radius of the site and will pursue contracts to produce agricultural products based on the needs of those institutional buyers. The Cooperative will act as a marketing and aggregation hub for the products generated by the Co-op members. Each co-op member will represent a nested enterprise within the comprehensive management plan of the farm who is responsible for the management of their component of the whole system. The compensation of each co-op member will be generated through the sale of agricultural products through the cooperative with a small fee being paid to the Cooperative to support its functions.

2. Stimulate the growth of the agricultural and working lands workforce.

Use of physical Cooperative infrastructure is not permanent. The Cooperative intended to act as an incubator to allow Veteran Farmers to gain experience, embed in the community, and acquire the capital necessary to transition to an independent farming operation. The cooperative will partner with the Bennington County Conservation District, the Vermont Land Trust, and the Vermont Veterans Farming Coalition to facilitate the transition to working land in the region. Once established in independent farming, members will still be able to sell products through the cooperative as a farm to institution accelerator.

## Project Overview:

### Phase 1:

#### Establishing a Collaborative Framework and Initiating Sustainable Production – Year 1

In the foundational year of the Veteran Incubator Farming Cooperative, a meticulously orchestrated strategy will be employed to establish a strong bedrock for enduring success, resilience, and innovation in agricultural practices tailored for veterans. This phase is characterized by intensive planning and the development of a robust infrastructure designed to support the multifaceted needs of the cooperative and its future members, particularly emphasizing legal frameworks, sustainable agriculture, and infrastructural development.

Central to this phase is the establishment of strategic partnerships with the Bennington County Conservation District (BCCD), the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), and the Vermont Law School (VLS), essential for elevating standards and setting new benchmarks in agricultural and legal frameworks. The collaboration with BCCD will be particularly vital, not only for accessing financial and technical assistance to enhance environmental stewardship standards but also for their active role in the recruitment and training of the Cooperative's pilot cohort of veteran farmers.

This recruitment drive is designed to integrate 2-3 local veteran farmers into the Cooperative, committing them to a six-year engagement that includes one year of planning followed by five years of farming. With support and resources from the BCCD, these veterans will be carefully selected to ensure their alignment with the Cooperative's ethos and goals. Upon joining, they will participate in the District's Working Lands Workforce Development Program, which will provide them with targeted training. This preparation is crucial for their success and will culminate in the development of an intensive, layered agroforestry system within a designated pilot farming area provided by the Vermont Veterans Home. This system is intended not only to yield immediate benefits for these pilot farmers but also to serve as a scalable and replicable model for sustainable agriculture across the Cooperative's leased lands.

Through this targeted recruitment and training strategy, the Cooperative and BCCD will provide these veterans with a unique platform for growth and development, aligning their individual aspirations with the broader goals of the Cooperative. The introduction of advanced environmental stewardship standards, the development of a comprehensive conservation plan, and the creation of a funding cycle application calendar, crafted and implemented with BCCD's support, will further ensure that the Cooperative not only benefits its members but also sets a precedent for responsible and sustainable agricultural practices within the community.

Simultaneously, the collaboration with the Vermont Law School (VLS) will be instrumental in carefully crafting the Cooperative's legal infrastructure, which is fundamental for adeptly maneuvering through the intricacies of agricultural law and ensuring rigorous compliance. This partnership will focus on developing several key legal documents that are essential for the Cooperative's operational and structural integrity. These include the creation of compliant articles of incorporation that will legally establish the Cooperative, a thoughtfully structured lease agreement that outlines the terms of land use between the Cooperative and the Vermont Veterans Home, and detailed cooperative membership agreements that define the relationship, rights, and responsibilities between the Cooperative and its individual members.

This comprehensive approach to establishing the Cooperative's legal framework is designed to ensure that all facets of the organization are grounded in strong legal principles, transparency, and adaptability to future changes. The articles of incorporation will serve as the Cooperative's constitutional foundation, while the lease and membership agreements will provide clear guidelines and expectations, fostering a sense of security and trust among all parties involved. By proactively addressing these legal dimensions with VLS's expertise, the Cooperative is set to have a robust governance structure that supports effective decision-making, upholds accountability, and facilitates the navigation of legal and regulatory challenges. This legal groundwork is not only crucial for protecting the Cooperative's interests but also for enabling it to function as a dynamic, member-driven entity that can adapt and grow in alignment with its evolving objectives and the broader agricultural context.

The Cooperative's engagement with the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) and specifically the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) represents a strategic endeavor to secure critical funding and support for infrastructural development. This includes the procurement and installation of high tunnels for extended season growing and enhanced crop protection, the construction of strategic fencing to safeguard both crops and livestock, and the implementation of advanced irrigation systems to optimize water usage and enhance crop vitality. Additionally, investment in quality orchard stock and reliable seed sources will be fundamental for establishing diverse and productive management areas within the Cooperative.

These infrastructure components are essential not just for the day-to-day operations but also for setting the stage for the Cooperative's members to engage in various agricultural ventures. High tunnels, for example, will facilitate early planting and extended harvests, offering members the opportunity to generate produce outside the standard growing season, thereby increasing productivity and potential market opportunities. Strategic fencing will not only protect investments but also delineate specific areas for individual or collaborative projects, while state-of-the-art irrigation systems will ensure water efficiency and sustainability, crucial for long-term success and environmental stewardship.

In parallel to these infrastructure planning developments, the Cooperative's initiation of small-scale production will serve as both a pilot for future expansion and a means to establish vital records with the Farm Services Agency and begin pursuing NRCS funds. This early venture into production is designed to kickstart the Cooperative's agricultural output, setting a precedent for operational excellence and laying the groundwork for future scalability.

In addition to establishing a solid legal and operational foundation, the Cooperative will proactively initiate engagement with local institutional food buyers to secure letters of intent to purchase farm products. This strategic outreach is a critical component of the Cooperative's business model, aimed at ensuring a stable market and demand for the products cultivated by its members.

The process will commence with a thorough market analysis to identify potential institutional buyers within the region, such as schools, hospitals, and other large-scale food service operations that could benefit from fresh, locally produced agricultural goods. Following this analysis, the Cooperative will develop tailored outreach strategies to present the benefits of partnering with the Cooperative, emphasizing the quality, locality, and sustainability of the produce offered.

Subsequent to these initial engagements, the Cooperative will work closely with interested buyers to draft and finalize letters of intent with an initial throughput target of \$175,000-\$200,000 in commitments or a combination of commitments and additional revenue streams from alternate sources. These documents will serve not only as a commitment to purchase but also as a framework for understanding the specific needs and preferences of each buyer, enabling the Cooperative to tailor its production accordingly. Such agreements will also be instrumental in providing the Cooperative's members with clear insights into market demands, allowing them to plan and adjust their production cycles, crop selections, and farming practices to meet these needs effectively.

This proactive approach to establishing market connections will not only facilitate a direct farm-to-institution pipeline, enhancing the local food system's resilience and sustainability, but it will also provide the Cooperative with a predictable revenue stream, reducing risks and uncertainties associated with farming operations. Moreover, these relationships with local institutions will foster a sense of community integration and support, further solidifying the Cooperative's role as a key player in the region's agricultural and food systems.

Through these multifaceted initiatives, the Cooperative is set to establish a robust foundation for both its success and a broader positive impact on the agricultural community. By meticulously crafting legal and environmental frameworks, advancing infrastructural development, and pioneering sustainable production practices, the Cooperative is poised to emerge as a leader in agricultural innovation, collaboration, and sustainability. The proactive engagement to secure letters of intent from local institutional food buyers further exemplifies the Cooperative's commitment to a sustainable business model, ensuring a reliable market for its products and fostering direct farm-to-institution relationships. This, in turn, not only stabilizes the Cooperative's revenue streams but also integrates its operations into the local food ecosystem, reinforcing community ties and support.

The Cooperative is thus envisioned as a dynamic platform for its veteran members, providing a nurturing environment for growth, innovation, and shared achievements. By offering veterans opportunities to engage directly with market demands through institutional partnerships, the Cooperative enhances their ability to make informed decisions and adapt their practices for greater success. In doing so, the Cooperative not only supports its members' individual aspirations and well-being but also champions a broader movement towards a more resilient, interconnected, and sustainable agricultural future, setting a precedent for others to follow.

Phase 2:

#### Collaborative Framework Implementation and Scaling up Production – Year 2-3

As the Veteran Incubator Farming Cooperative advances into years two and three, it will undertake a series of strategic activities aimed at solidifying the infrastructure and ramping up agricultural production, pivotal for ensuring the sustainability and expansion of its operations.

Key Activities and Collaborations:

1. **Comprehensive Infrastructure Development:** The Cooperative's investment in a diverse set of strategic legacy infrastructure, including high tunnels, irrigation lines, fence lines, and agroforestry installations, is designed to

provide a durable and productive base for its agricultural endeavors. High tunnels will extend the growing seasons and enhance crop protection, irrigation lines are critical for efficient water management, fence lines ensure the safety and demarcation of production areas, and agroforestry installations contribute to biodiversity, soil health, and long-term yield stability. These infrastructures are selected for their proven ability to improve agricultural efficiency, resilience to environmental challenges, and contribution to ecological sustainability.

2. Equipment Acquisition for Enhanced Production: The decision to acquire specific farming equipment such as a skid steer, walk-behind tractors, and various cultivation implements is rooted in the need to support intensive, diversified, and efficient farming practices on a small scale. This equipment is essential for preparing land, maintaining crops, and facilitating various agricultural operations, enabling the Cooperative's members to effectively manage their plots and produce a wide variety of crops. These tools are also pivotal in ensuring that the Cooperative can engage in practices like precision agriculture, which optimizes inputs, reduces waste, and increases crop yields.

3. Funding Initiatives with BCCD and NRCS: Engaging with BCCD and NRCS to secure funding through programs like EQIP underscores the Cooperative's commitment to leveraging available resources to enhance its agricultural and environmental stewardship. These funds will not only facilitate the aforementioned infrastructure and equipment investments but also embody a strategic approach to accessing federal and state support, maximizing the financial efficiency of the Cooperative's operations, and ensuring compliance with environmental and agricultural standards.

4. Scaling Up Production in the Pilot Area: The intentional scaling up of production activities within the pilot area serves multiple purposes. It allows the Cooperative to test and refine its agricultural practices, gather data on production efficiencies, and demonstrate the viability of its farming model. For the pilot cohort farmers, this expansion provides an opportunity to realize the potential of their training and investment, translating into tangible outputs and income. In order to establish the long term viability of the Cooperative the pilot cohort & executive director will attempt to establish \$200,000 in capital throughput in order to maintain sufficient funds to maintain a base operating budget for the organization with an overhead extraction of less than 20% through a combination of institutional sales, fundraising, grant acquisitions, and educational events. It also sets a precedent for future members, showcasing the Cooperative's capacity to support successful, sustainable farming operations.

5. Community and Market Engagement: As the Cooperative expands its production, ongoing engagement with the community and local markets becomes increasingly important. This engagement ensures that the Cooperative's production aligns with market demand and community needs, fostering local economic development and food security. Establishing strong market connections also provides direct feedback channels for the Cooperative, allowing it to adjust its production strategies in response to evolving market trends and community preferences.

By diligently implementing these activities and fostering these collaborations, the Cooperative will solidify its foundation and expand its reach within the agricultural sector. The rationale behind each activity is geared toward building a resilient, adaptable, and environmentally responsible operation that not only supports its members but also contributes positively to the local community and the broader agricultural landscape. Through these efforts, the Cooperative is set to evolve into a model of sustainable agriculture, providing valuable insights and practices that can be replicated and adapted across the sector.

## Project Timeline & Deliverables

No.	Goals	Description
	<b>Phase 1</b>	<b>Initiation of Collaborative Framework and Sustainable Production</b>
1	Strategic Partnership Agreements	Formalize collaborations with BCCD, NRCS, and VLS, detailing roles and communication protocols.
2	Veteran Farmer Recruitment and Training	Integrate and train 2-3 veteran farmers through BCCD's programs and develop an agroforestry system.
3	Legal Infrastructure Development	Develop articles of incorporation, lease, and membership agreements with VLS's assistance.
4	Infrastructure and Equipment Acquisition	Install high tunnels, fencing, irrigation systems, and invest in orchard and seed stock.
5	Initial Production and Market Engagement	Start small-scale production, analyze the market, secure purchase intents from institutional buyers.
6	Environmental and Conservation Planning	Develop a conservation plan and implement stewardship standards with BCCD and NRCS.
7	Documentation and Reporting	Establish systems for tracking activities, agreements, and transactions; report to stakeholders.
8	Community Engagement and Awareness	Raise awareness through events and media engagement, highlighting the Cooperative's mission. Establish fall production in the pilot area & host a fall harvest festival.
9	Strategic Planning for Year 2 and Beyond	Assess Year 1 outcomes and plan for future expansion, member benefits, and market reach.

10	Feedback Mechanisms and Continuous Improvement	Set up feedback channels and improvement processes based on performance metrics.
	<b>Phase 2</b>	<b>Transition to Enhanced Infrastructure and Production Scaling</b>
11	Comprehensive Infrastructure Development	Develop and enhance key infrastructures like high tunnels, irrigation lines, fence lines, and agroforestry installations.
12	Equipment Acquisition for Enhanced Production	Procure essential farming equipment such as skid steers, walk-behind tractors, and cultivation implements for diversified farming.
13	Funding Initiatives with BCCD and NRCS	Secure funding through partnerships with BCCD and NRCS for infrastructure investment and compliance with standards.
14	Scaling Up Production in the Pilot Area	Expand production activities within the pilot area, leveraging the area to refine agricultural practices and increase output.
15	Community and Market Engagement	Strengthen engagement with the local community and markets to ensure alignment with market demands and community needs.

## Budget Narrative