

CROSSCUTTING ISSUES

Food System Business Planning and Technical Assistance

What role do business and technical assistance service providers play in strengthening Vermont's food system? Are there service gaps that, if filled, could advance the development of Vermont's food system? How could service providers collaborate, improve, and coordinate their services more effectively?

The [Council on the Future of Vermont's](#) 2009 report, [Imagining Vermont: Values and Vision for the Future](#), reflects the views of nearly 5,000 Vermonters about the future direction of the state.

The report highlighted critical areas for strengthening Vermont's food system, including expanding agricultural partnerships: "Agricultural organizations and associations need to partner in common purpose around a long-term vision for the future of agriculture and value-added production in the state, then act to realize it." The [Farm to Plate Strategic Plan](#) organizes Vermont's food system around a common vision for our future, while the [Farm to Plate Network](#)—composed of food system organizations—was created to activate the Plan.

Many organizations in the F2P Network offer a variety of educational (Chapter 4, Section 2) and workforce development (Chapter 4, Section 3) programs, workshops, and services that provide opportunities for lifelong learning and resources for skills development to entrepreneurs, farmers, students, manufacturers, and other businesses in Vermont's food system. Vermont is also home to a wide range of business planning and technical assistance support

"As someone who is beginning to be a farmer, I had no idea about the different websites that I can go to as resources."

—Focus group participant

organizations that help to develop business plans, identify diversification strategies, and implement financial management systems, as well as provide topic, product, and process expertise. This section summarizes the range of business planning and technical assistance services currently available, identifies service gaps and needs, and makes recommendations for how the field can continue to make a positive impact on Vermont's food system.



Grain workshop at Butterworks Farm.

PHOTO CREDIT: VHC/B/Farm Viability

GETTING TO 2020

Goal 19 of the F2P Strategic Plan focuses on the continuing need to provide relevant, accessible, timely, and coordinated assistance to Vermont's food system entrepreneurs and enterprises.

Goal 19: Business planning and technical assistance services will be highly coordinated, strategic, and accessible to food system businesses.

Vermont's Food System Community Responds to Tropical Storm Irene

Vermont's close-knit agricultural community rapidly sprang into action after Tropical Storm Irene swept through the state on August 28th, 2011. As neighbors and CSA members worked to help farmers dig out of the muck, dozens of agencies, institutions, and nonprofits that assist and promote Vermont agriculture activated key programs to help affected farms.

Grants and loans were soon after offered to farmers who had suffered damage, thanks to an outpouring of donations from individuals and organizations. The largest grant program was the [Vermont Farm Disaster Relief Fund](#), organized by the [Vermont Community Foundation](#) and [Vermont Agency of Agriculture](#). As of December 22, 2011, it had raised \$2.25 million and had made grants to over 170 farmers.

But some farmers needed more hands-on assistance. So just after the storm, the [Vermont Farm Viability Program](#), which works with partners around the state to offer business planning and technical assistance services to farmers and food producers, directed \$60,000 in funding to [UVM Extension](#) to offer disaster recovery planning services for affected farms.

Eighty farms were contacted by [UVM Extension](#), and half suffered damage that required short-term recovery assistance. Six farms that were more severely damaged continued to receive longer-term assistance to develop disaster recovery plans.

The [Vermont Farm Viability Program](#) also convened multiple Irene-related meetings of technical assistance stakeholders from around Vermont — federal, state, and local organizations that work in various ways to help Vermont farmers become more profitable and sustainable. The meetings helped stakeholders coordinate their technical assistance responses in the wake of Irene. In the spring of 2012, they led an effort to survey affected farmers to assess what damages and needs remained so that they could offer longer term support for impacted farms.

The thing with farming is that it's one of the few professions where you have a multitude of uncontrollable variables. You can't ever predict the weather from year to year or even day to day, so it's high risk. Sometimes it's scary to want to invest more into land or overextend yourself.

—Windham focus group participant

Participants discussed, among many things, coordinating their Irene-related legislative requests, encouraging young farmers to sign up for crop insurance, and preparing for future disasters.

"I was surprised by how needed these meetings were and how people wanted them to keep going," said Ela Chapin, director of the [Vermont Farm Viability Program](#). "People really needed to meet face-to-face and hear directly from each other about what was going on."

Vermont Agricultural Damage Report as of November 11, 2011

Producers Impacted: 463

Fruit/Vegetable Acres Damaged: 497

Corn Acres Damaged: 6,029

Pasture Acres Damaged: 1,752

Soybean Acres Damaged: 225

Maple Acres Wind Damaged: 1,032

Hay Acres Damaged: 6,508

Acres of Land Damaged: 9,348

Compiled by USDA Farm Service Agency, Vermont State Office.



Kara Fitzgerald and Ryan Wood Beauchamp of Evening Song Farm stand by the remains of their greenhouse, destroyed along with an irrigation system when floodwaters from Tropical Storm Irene caused the nearby Mill River to jump its banks, sweeping away all the topsoil and replacing it with rocks, boulders, and sand on their five-acre vegetable farm in Cuttingsville, VT.

PHOTO CREDIT: John Lazenby/www.lazenbyphoto.com

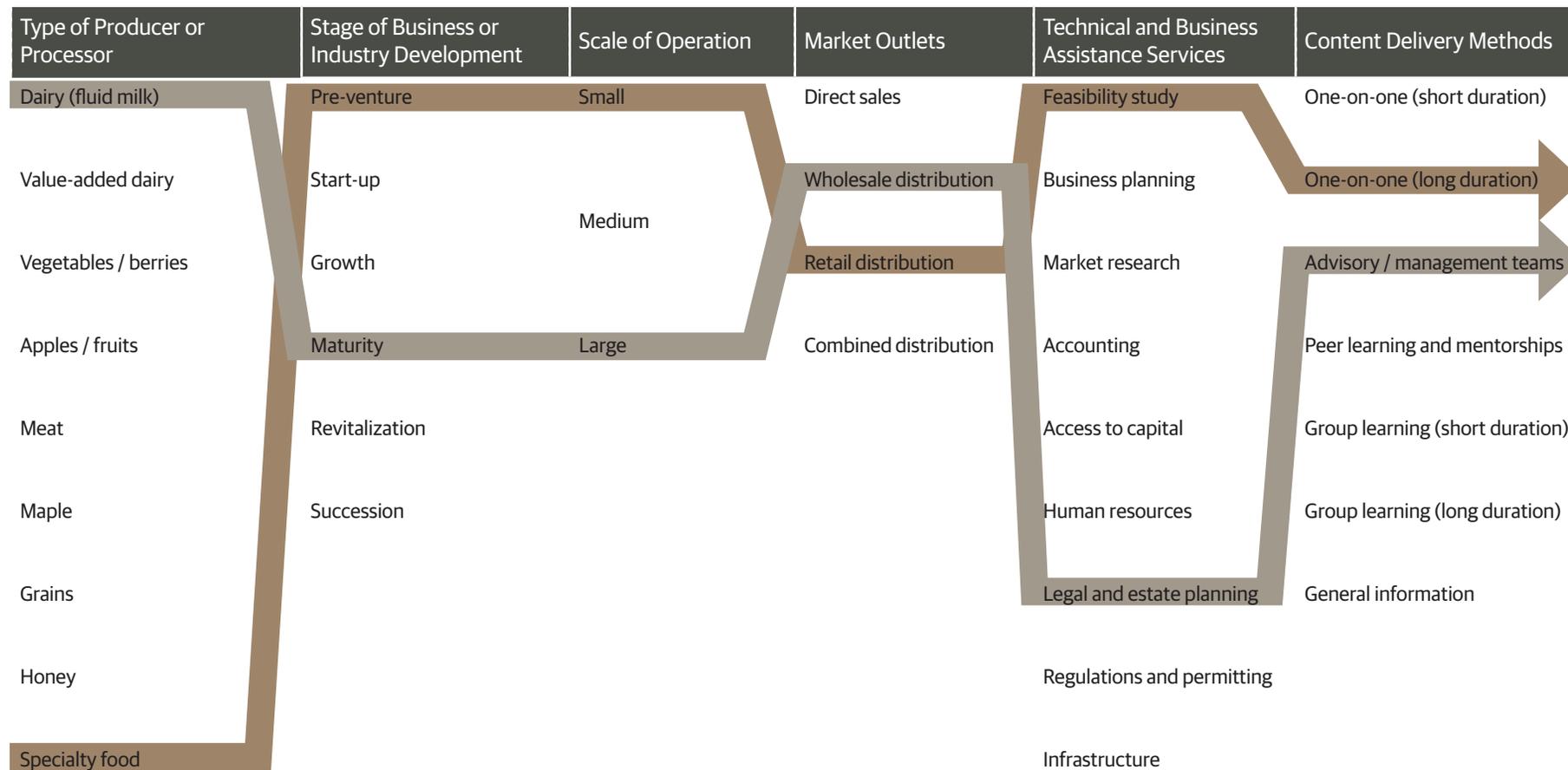
CURRENT CONDITIONS

Business planning and technical assistance services exist to increase the viability of food system entrepreneurs and businesses. Many support organizations also help entrepreneurs and businesses address environmental, social, and other issues. **While there are many public and private business planning and technical assistance programs and services available, many stakeholders and focus group participants noted that they sometimes don't know where to start to find the most appropriate service to meet their specific needs.** This section reviews the

types of services and content delivery methods available in Vermont, and identifies the major public and nonprofit service providers. In most cases, private consultants can also provide these valuable services; however, it is beyond the scope of this report to provide a list of vetted private consultants.

It is important for any entrepreneur or enterprise to identify its stage of business development, understand the pros and cons of its intended type and scale of operation, and properly identify the types of market outlets that are most closely aligned with its stage and scale of business. In addition, the internal systems of any

Figure 4.4.1: Navigating the Business Planning and Technical Assistance Continuum



business (e.g., financial, quality control, human resources, operational systems, planning, marketing, and so on) should be sufficient to meet the needs of the business at its stage of development and scale of operation.

Figure 4.4.1 illustrates some of the ways entrepreneurs/enterprises and business planning and technical assistance providers can coordinate their efforts. For example, a small pre-venture specialty food manufacturer that intends to market its cheesecake at local co-ops may work on a feasibility study or business plan with the [Vermont Food Venture Center](#). Or, a large multi-generational dairy farm may work with a team of trusted advisors to prepare a succession plan.

Stages of Enterprise Development

Many kinds of nonprofit and public sector organizations, as well as private consultants, provide assistance at various stages of development. Every food enterprise goes through various stages of development over the course of its existence. Each of these stages is marked by specific organizational, financial, infrastructural, workforce, sales, and marketing needs. Enterprises need to know what stage of development they are in and to pay attention to when they are transitioning from one stage to the next so they can adjust their operations accordingly.

Note: The use of the word enterprise includes any farm or food-related business.

 The **pre-venture** stage refers to a nonexistent or nascent enterprise. At this stage, opportunities for new products or services are identified, but supply chains and market outlets are unclear and “proof of concept” has not yet been established. Planning and research through, for example, testing recipes at the [Vermont Food Venture Center](#), legally establishing the enterprise, writing a business plan, and finding start-up funding are the primary activities of the pre-venture stage of enterprise development.

 The **start-up** stage is characterized by launching the business, hiring the first employee(s), setting up organizational systems, achieving break-even sales targets, building a customer base, and establishing a track record for product quality and service. This stage of development can last many years depending on how long it takes to firmly establish the business in the marketplace. Technical assistance in this development stage includes conducting specific

market feasibility studies, establishing financial and human resource systems, and developing operational and quality control procedures, to name a few.

 Enterprises in the **growth** stage experience an expansion in overall sales volume and in the number and variety of customers, an expansion of products or services offered, and an established brand identity in the marketplace. They hire more employees and improve or expand infrastructure, equipment, internal systems, and overall production capacity. However, enterprise expansion requires more than just increased sales and employment. It often requires an assessment and adjustment of the organizational structure; the delegation of management control; and the development of longer-term strategies for human resources, access to capital, and expansion through a strategic planning process.

 **Mature** enterprises have achieved solid performance and stability and, because of either market conditions or the actions of owners, appear to be financially sustainable. However, without dramatic change, companies in this stage are unlikely to expand significantly. Even though they have achieved strong brand recognition and a solid repeat customer base, mature enterprises often face many challenges in sustaining themselves in a rapidly changing and competitive marketplace or face declining sales or changes in the regulatory environment. A focus on problem solving, leadership, and quality improvement is often necessary for a mature business to maintain its position in the marketplace. Sometimes, planning for the succession of leadership or creating an exit strategy for the business is an appropriate strategy.

 A **revitalization** stage arises when external and/or internal activities force a mature enterprise to a tipping point. A downward trend may ensue, or innovative “challenger firms” may introduce new ideas, products, or services to revive the sector. Taking action in the maturity stage can send an organization in new directions. Innovation and diversification can lead to new products and new markets. Companies can be reorganized to provide the flexibility needed to meet the new challenges associated with new directions, markets, and products.

🍏 Scale of Operation

Every food system enterprise operates at a particular scale, although even large operations in Vermont may be classified as small by national standards. For example, the average size of a farm in the United States in 2007 was 418 acres. The average size of a farm in Vermont was 177 acres, and about 88% of all farms in Vermont are classified as “small family farms” by the USDA. Food manufacturing in Vermont runs the gamut from entrepreneurs making sauces out of their homes or at commercial kitchens a couple of times per month, to nationally distributed ice cream and coffee manufacturers. Different sizes of operations may require different levels of infrastructure (e.g., number of tractors, coolers or freezers, stainless steel processing equipment) and thus have varying levels of assets required to successfully produce at a particular scale of production.

🍏 Market Outlet

The stage of food enterprise development and scale of operation are important considerations for understanding the type of market outlet an enterprise can reasonably expect to access. Businesses in the early stage of development, small to medium-scale operations, and some businesses in the growth stage need direct distribution channels to achieve profitability. Direct distribution may also be a necessity in more remote locations of the state where distributor routes do not currently exist. As a business develops and its scale of operation grows, it has increasing access to larger market outlets.

Let’s take the example of a farm that converts raw inputs (e.g., apples) to a value-added product (e.g., cider). If the scale of production is small and the product is made on the farm, the business may make only enough cider to sell during the fall. Therefore, to make a sufficient margin on the product, the farm will likely deliver the product directly to a small retail outlet that is looking to source locally produced cider in season, or will sell it directly at a farm stand. However, if that farm is a medium-scale processor and can produce its product year-round, then a larger on-farm or commercial facility is likely to be used to make the product. Again, the processor may choose to distribute some, or all, of its product directly (thus doing everything necessary to maintain those retail accounts in-house), or it may choose to use a wholesaler. The use of a wholesaler



PHOTO CREDIT: VHCB/Farm Viability

Business plan and mentoring technical assistance has helped Jericho Settlers’ Farm expand its business.

is often necessary to reach larger, regional market outlets (e.g., grocery stores), restaurants, and institutional markets (e.g., hospitals and schools).

🍏 Business Planning Services

Business planning refers to the suite of services that includes business plan development and best management practices, implementing financial systems and developing financial acumen, human resource management, diversification strategies, legal guidance, and marketing.

Business planning needs vary by scale of operation and stage of business development. Ideally, the stage and scale of a business will be matched with the appropriate market outlet. The core business assistance services offered to Vermont’s food system businesses include the following:

- 🍏 New enterprise feasibility, business plan development, enterprise budget analysis, strategic planning
- 🍏 Market feasibility research, market research, marketing

- 🍏 Accounting and tax preparation
- 🍏 Legal and estate planning
- 🍏 Access to capital
- 🍏 Human resource and management

🔑 **New Enterprise Feasibility, Business Plan Development, Enterprise Budget Analysis, Strategic Planning**

These types of services focus on business-related questions such as business plan writing, cost of production analysis, product feasibility plans, market feasibility analysis, marketing and communications plans, human resources and labor planning, financial analysis to identify viable diversification strategies, and so on. For example, the *Vermont Farm Viability Program* at the [Vermont Housing and Conservation Board](#) provides access to business plan advisors based out of four organizations ([University of Vermont Extension](#), [Intervale Center](#), [NOFA Vermont](#), and [Land for Good](#)). They also provide access to independent business advisors.



The Clark family diversified their farm operations with business planning assistance.

PHOTO CREDIT: VHCB/Farm Viability

Preparing a business plan prior to starting a food enterprise is highly advisable. **A common theme identified throughout the F2P process is that many farmers do not think of their farms as businesses, and most have entered farming as a lifestyle choice or because it is what their family has always done.** Lack of business management expertise is considered one important reason for financial difficulties for food system enterprises. This issue is particularly important as more young farmers and food entrepreneurs are entering the field.

Technical assistance providers also help farmers with strategic planning (e.g., helping them set goals and incorporate strategies into their business plans). Strategic planning typically is provided for growth and mature businesses; however, earlier-stage businesses also include elements of strategic planning in their business plans.

🔑 **Market Feasibility Research, Market Research, Marketing**

A variety of market research and marketing services are available to assist food enterprises reach customers. For one-on-one services, there are both private market research consultants and public and nonprofit services. Some business planning service providers also assist with developing marketing and consumer outreach plans. Many organizations that offer business planning also provide other forms of marketing support (e.g., how to effectively use social media). Food system enterprises can also benefit from branding and media communication services. In Vermont, these are primarily provided by private consulting or marketing firms.

“Some things are marketable and some things are not. A lot of times local farmers are not good marketers or aren’t good businesspeople and they need help figuring out ways to better package their products to get them to market and price them accordingly.”

—Focus group participant

🔑 **Accounting and Tax Preparation**

As with any other type of business, food system businesses need well-documented financial records. There are many private accounting and tax service firms in Vermont. [Yankee Farm Credit](#) also provides these services to farmers. Some business plan advisors can assist enterprises in setting up or improving their bookkeeping systems.

Legal and Estate Planning

The majority of legal and estate services are for mature enterprises or owners wishing to exit their businesses. While legal advice to farms is often provided by professionals, there is also the well-documented and useful [Legal Guide to the Business of Farming in Vermont](#). The guide addresses the legal structure of the farm business; farm transfer and estate planning; farmland tenure and leasing; and the regulation of agriculture and land use, farm labor, organic agriculture, and on-farm food processing and marketing. The guide is also used as a reference tool by service providers to identify areas that need additional research or technical assistance. Farmers may also use it to identify and address issues that need to be included in the farm's business plan or to become better informed consumers of legal or farm viability services. There is a wide range of legal services that can be obtained from private consultants and legal firms such as incorporation services, contract review, succession and estate planning, conflict mediation, and other human resource issues. Legal firms can also help enterprises create shares in their corporations and develop legal documents for raising capital, such as private placement memoranda or convertible debt notes.

Access to Capital

[Chapter 4, Section 5: Financing the Food System](#) explores the financing resources available to food system entrepreneurs and enterprises. It also includes an inventory of all types of capital providers within the food system. Access to capital is needed at all stages of business development, and business planning and technical assistance providers can help educate business owners about the best options for their enterprises. Capital is also necessary for emergency situations. Spring flooding in 2011, followed by the devastating effects of Tropical Storm Irene, left many farmers with severe losses. In response, many technical assistance providers teamed up with capital providers to offer a variety of services, including emergency grants and loans.

Human Resource Management

Human resource management is typically needed for larger-scale businesses because they have more employees and have more complex governance and operational systems. Larger-scale food manufacturers often have human resource personnel, and hire private consultants to help develop human resource management systems. The

majority of human resource assistance for farmers is embedded within other kinds of business assistance programs, such as the *Vermont Farm Viability Program*.

Technical Assistance Services

Technical assistance (TA) is defined as topic, product, and process expertise. As described throughout Chapter 3 of the F2P Strategic Plan, Vermont's food system entrepreneurs and enterprises have a diverse set of technical assistance needs that vary by activity (e.g., production, processing, distribution, retail, and nutrient management) and product (e.g., vegetables, bread, cheese). Technical assistance also includes best practices and problem-solving support for all types of farms and food businesses. For example, *UVM Extension* delivers a range of services, from pest management and food safety protocols, to best practices for food producers and support in finding affordable farmland. Informal farmer-to-farmer networks have also historically been successful in helping farmers overcome many technical challenges.

Following are core technical assistance services offered to Vermont's food system businesses:

- 🍏 Regulations and permitting
- 🍏 Production
- 🍏 Food science, recipe development, product research, and packaging
- 🍏 Food safety
- 🍏 Land access
- 🍏 Infrastructure (i.e. facilities, equipment design, and engineering)
- 🍏 On-farm energy efficiency and renewable energy production

Regulations and Permitting

These services help food system businesses understand existing regulations and negotiate permitting, address environmental and water quality issues, and deal with third party compliance (such as maintaining GAP certification and/or organic certification). The [Vermont Agency of Agriculture, Food and Markets](#) (VAAF) enforces many of Vermont's agricultural regulations, the [Agency of Natural Resources](#) regulates

air and water quality standards, and the [Vermont Department of Health](#) regulates many of the state's food safety standards. [USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service](#) and the regional [Natural Resource Conservation Districts](#) also provide an array of technical assistance and incentive programs related to conservation, soil health, and water quality. For specific regulatory information, see [Chapter 4, Section 7: Food System Regulations](#).

— Fork Production

Production techniques and best practices vary depending on the type of product grown, raised, or processed. Traditionally, informal farmer-to-farmer networks have been successful in helping farmers overcome many technical challenges. Personal experience with food production through trial and error is often the best technical assistance available. *UVM Extension* has been the primary formal organization delivering these types of services, from pest management and food safety protocols, to best practices for vegetable or livestock production. Other technical assistance advisors provide animal nutrition and agronomic support, livestock husbandry expertise, pasture management and healthy soil development assistance, integrated pest management techniques, and implementing “new” technologies (e.g., hoop houses, bedded-packed barns).

— Fork Food Science, Recipe Development, Product Research, and Packaging

A number of organizations and agencies provide expertise in everything a producer needs to know about food science, recipe development, product research, and packaging. For example, the [Vermont Food Venture Center](#) offers food science, food safety, and packaging training and assistance to its clients at its facility in Hardwick. Co-packing businesses such as [Green Mountain Co-Pack](#) and [Freedom Foods](#) can help small producers adjust their recipes as they expand and larger-volume production runs are needed.

— Fork Food Safety

UVM Extension has staff dedicated to food safety, such as meat and value-added food product safety and Good Agricultural Practices (GAP) certification for vegetable producers. Various technical service providers can assist with developing Hazard Analysis & Critical Control Points (HACCP) plans. VAAFM also has safety monitoring programs that provide information to producers.



Wellspring Farm was one of the first farms enrolled in the Vermont Farm Viability Program

— Fork Land Access

For many new farmers, accessing affordable land can be a daunting task. Vermont has several organizations that assist producers and processors with access to land, including the [Vermont Land Trust](#), [UVM Extension's New Farmer Network](#), and [Land for Good](#). Some of these organizations can assist in securing conservation easements on farmland to ensure perpetual agricultural production. Food system enterprises looking for commercial space can also obtain free assistance from their local [Small Business Development Center](#) or [Regional Development Corporation](#).

— Fork Infrastructure

Infrastructure includes barns, feed and seed storage, safety equipment, fencing, tractors, farming equipment, processing equipment, and distribution vehicles. Technical assistance providers can help businesses identify the type of infrastructure needed and how to access the capital to purchase it. Organizations such as the [Vermont Manufacturing Extension Center](#) (VMEC) can assist food manufacturing operations and slaughter facilities with building design assistance to maximize the efficient use of available space and product flow through a facility.

🔑 Energy

Several organizations provide technical assistance for energy efficiency and renewable energy production, including VAAFM, [Efficiency Vermont](#), and [Renewable Energy Vermont](#). Energy-related technical assistance providers can help enterprises reduce energy usage and costs as well as explore on-farm energy generation opportunities (e.g., solar and wind installations, oilseed crops for farm-scale biodiesel production).

🍏 Content Delivery Methods

Business planning and technical assistance services are offered in a variety of formats, ranging from long-term one-on-one assistance to general information available on websites.

🔑 General Information

Published information such as online or printed resource guides, websites, listservs, enterprise budget templates, YouTube videos, Facebook posts, and other publications provide low-cost access to resources and networking opportunities for food system enterprises. One benefit of this information format is that business owners can access it at their convenience.

🔑 One-on-One (Short Duration)

Many service providers offer short-duration technical assistance that includes one-time meetings and/or services that last for a short period of time. While brief, these short-duration consultations can provide necessary services to food system business owners with very specific, immediate needs.

🔑 One-on-One (Long Duration)

One-on-one consultations with professional technical and business assistance consultants are valued by many farmers and food system business owners because the consultant can really get to know the specific business and build a trusting relationship with the farmer or food business owner over time. Some programs, such as the *Vermont Farm Viability Program* and the [Vermont Agricultural Development Program](#), require a commitment or enrollment for a period of time.

GAP: What Does It Mean to a Producer?

Producers often hear about the need to be “GAP certified” but wonder what the acronym means for their businesses. This type of certification verifies the farm’s adherence to Good Agricultural Practices (GAP) as outlined in the *Food and Drug Administration’s* “Guide to Minimize Microbial Food Safety Hazards for Fresh Fruits and Vegetables.” Following these practices is currently voluntary for most farms, but some distributors and retailers are now requiring GAP certification before they will enter into an agreement with a food producer.

Compliance with GAP is confirmed through on-farm audits. Both the USDA and private companies conduct audits. Buyers tell growers whether they require the USDA audit or a private audit. The USDA GAP/ GMP Audit Checklist consists of seven sections: Farm Review, Field Harvest and Field Packing, House Packing Facility, Storage and Transportation, a fifth section that is currently not used, Wholesale Distribution Center / Terminal Warehouse, and Preventive Food Defense Procedures (intended to protect food from intentional acts of contamination).

The general questions in the audit checklist are constructed to verify the implementation of a basic food safety program. The Farm Review questions verify that hazards associated with land use and water are mitigated, and the questions related to Field Harvest and Field Packing, House Packing, and Storage and Transportation verify that precautions and practices that mitigate microbial contamination have been implemented during harvest and field packing, house packing, and storage and transportation.

Buyers tell growers which of the sections they need to pass. GAP certification audits are conducted during harvest, when harvest crews are operating. Copies of the FDA’s “Guide to Minimize Microbial Food Safety Hazards for Fresh Fruits and Vegetables” are available at: www.fda.gov/downloads/Food/Guidance-ComplianceRegulatoryInformation/GuidanceDocuments/ProduceandPlanProducts/UCM169112.pdf. Some materials taken from the FAQ Sheet *Introduction to Commercial Sales* by Rose Wilson are available at www.rosaliewilson.com.

To learn more about the GAP standards, understand how to prepare for GAP certification, and schedule a GAP certification audit, contact:

Auditing

Steve Parise
 Vermont Agency of Agriculture, Food and Markets
steve.parise@state.vt.us
 (802) 828-2436

Education and Technical Assistance

Ginger Nickerson, GAP Outreach Coordinator
 UVM Center for Sustainable Agriculture
gnickers@uvm.edu
 (802) 656-5490 or (802) 249-6701

— Advisory Boards and Management Teams

Advisory boards composed of business planning and technical assistance experts can provide food enterprises with unbiased, external feedback as well as the planning and budget-making discipline needed to grow businesses. The collective thinking that comes from the group being together discussing issues as a whole can add significant value. For example, *UVM Extension* runs a Dairy Management Team program in which volunteer or paid facilitators assist dairy farmers with developing and facilitating farm management teams that advise in both strategic and operational management.

— Peer Learning / Mentorships / Networking

Apprenticeships and mentorships can support the next generation of food system entrepreneurs. Nearly all farmers who participated in the F2P information gathering process emphasized that without a mentor, or without the apprenticeship experience they had, they would not be in business. Having someone available by phone, e-mail, or in person to brainstorm about technical or business planning challenges was identified as very important to the health and success of food businesses. It also is becoming more common to see retired or transitioning farmers as teachers and consultants. Compensating farmer-experts for their teachers that transfer experience and knowledge may be an important way to provide technical assistance to new and expanding farmers.

Farmer-to-farmer and business-to-business networking, whether through informal or formal means, is one of the best ways to build mutual support among food system businesses, and to build on “tried and true” problem-solving experience. This type of networking occurs in a variety of ways, from food business potluck dinners to trade association monthly or annual meetings to county fair gatherings. Pasture walks are also an increasingly common way for peers to share their knowledge.

— Group Learning (Long Duration)

Long-duration group learning offerings may include a series of workshops or a nonmatriculated course offered over a period of time (e.g., a semester). Examples include a new farmer training program that runs over a period of time, a series of classes on business planning or food safety, Spanish language classes, or a marketing course. These group learning experiences are education and workforce development



Educational workshop at Arcadia Brook Farm in North Ferrisburgh.

oriented but not within a matriculated program. Small Business Development Center and *UVM Extension* both offer longer-duration business planning classes.

— Group Learning (Short Duration)

One-time or short-duration workshops, clinics, and classes that focus on business and technical issues are offered by service providers and trade associations throughout the year. These include one-time or short-term food safety classes, marketing workshops (stand alone or at conferences), and production technique classes (e.g., season extension, beekeeping).

ANALYSIS

During the Technical Assistance and Business Planning working session held during the F2P planning process, technical assistance providers completed a rough matrix to begin to organize their services based on type of service and stage of business development. This rough inventory is intended to become the foundation for an online searchable database for food system enterprises with specific business or technical questions, and will help to identify gaps and opportunities into the future. This matrix will also

help funders and service providers be as efficient as possible in service delivery, and to identify key leverage points where collaboration might expand their impact and funding.

Table 4.4.1. summarizes the kinds of business and technical assistance available for various scales, stages, market outlets, and types businesses. There are at least 28 statewide and regional organizations that deliver technical assistance to Vermont's food system enterprises, as well as many member-based organizations and private consultants (not listed). **A Business Planning and Technical Assistance Service Provider Inventory, starting on page 24, summarizes each organization in more detail.**

While the business planning and technical assistance services available to food system enterprises appear fairly robust, there are some challenges, including visibility, gaps in services, and uneven coverage around the state. There is also continued need for professional development within the technical assistance community to ensure that the most up-to-date and relevant information and tools are made accessible, as well as the need to transparently evaluate the effectiveness of the services being provided.

During the F2P planning process, many food system entrepreneurs indicated that finding the business planning and/or technical assistance they need at any given time is not easy. Because the food system is so diverse and complex, it is essential to develop technical assistance networks. It is also important to simplify user access and ensure efficient delivery of these services. Moreover, timely and appropriate service referrals will help food system organizations find the right services for their needs.

Many food system businesses we spoke with indicated that having access to trusted one-on-one relationships with technical assistance service providers was very valuable. "Farm teams" or business advisory boards consisting of trusted professionals are also considered by stakeholders to be an effective way to address food enterprise challenges and should be further promoted.

🍏 Research

Across the food system, easily accessible research on markets, production inputs (e.g., compost), production techniques (e.g., season extension, food safety, herd genetics), and other issues are critical to support food system businesses. Regularly updated market research and analyses (i.e., what products are in demand and who is buying



Technical assistance providers on a tour of Misty Knoll Farm.

PHOTO CREDIT: VHCB/Farm Viability

what and at what volumes) could help inform producers about what products could help meet new and unmet consumer demand.

Climate change mitigation and adaptation research is also needed to inform technical assistance providers and food producers of the most effective ways to address dramatic weather events (e.g., flooding) and increasing temperatures. For example, production techniques could limit the effects of flooding, and production methods might be able to simultaneously mitigate climate change and help businesses adapt to its weather effects (e.g., closed-loop systems that retain soil and sequester carbon). Following Tropical Storm Irene, technical assistance providers offered a variety of emergency services to food system businesses, and additional assistance in risk management could significantly assist these businesses as extreme weather events continue to occur.

🍏 Natural Resource, Physical Infrastructure, and Technology

Technical assistance providers throughout the F2P planning process noted the lack of available and affordable farmland for new and existing farmers. The [New Farmer Network](#)

Table 4.4.1: Business and Technical Assistance Services Matrix

Service Providers	Feasibility & Planning						Marketing						Accounting & Taxes						Legal & Estate Planning						Access to Capital						
	1	2	3	4	5	6	1	2	3	4	5	6	1	2	3	4	5	6	1	2	3	4	5	6	1	2	3	4	5	6	
Agency of Commerce and Community Development (ACCD)																												✓	✓	✓	✓
Cellars at Jasper Hill (CJH)	✓	✓	✓																												
Efficiency Vermont (EV)																															
Farm Service Agency, USDA (FSA)																										✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Farmer's Watershed Alliance (FWA)			✓	✓	✓																										
Highfields Center for Composting (HCC)		✓	✓	✓	✓																										
Intervale Center (IC)	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓				✓	✓	✓				✓	✓	✓				✓	✓	✓		
Land for Good (LFG)																															
Northeast Organic Farming Association of Vermont (NOFA)	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓																			
Natural Resources Conservation Service, USDA (NRCS)		✓	✓	✓	✓			✓	✓	✓	✓															✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Rutland Area Farm and Food Link (RAFFL)																															
Regional Development Corporations (RDC)																											✓	✓	✓		
Rural Vermont (RV)		✓	✓																												

KEY

1 - PRE-VENTURE	2 - START-UP	3 - GROWTH	4 - MATURITY	5 - REVITALIZATION	6 - SUCCESSION
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Service Providers	Human Resources						Regulations & Permits						Production / Processing & Energy						Packaging & Safety						Land Access						Infrastructure												
	1	2	3	4	5	6	1	2	3	4	5	6	1	2	3	4	5	6	1	2	3	4	5	6	1	2	3	4	5	6	1	2	3	4	5	6							
ACCD									✓	✓	✓	✓																												✓	✓	✓	✓
CJH													✓	✓	✓	✓			✓	✓	✓	✓									✓	✓	✓	✓									
EV													✓	✓	✓	✓	✓																										
FSA																																											
FWA								✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓																									
HCC								✓	✓	✓	✓			✓	✓	✓																											
IC														✓	✓	✓	✓									✓	✓						✓	✓									
LFG																										✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓										✓
NOFA							✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓							✓	✓	✓	✓			✓	✓	✓										
NRCS							✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓																		✓	✓	✓	✓								
RAFFL														✓												✓	✓																
RDC				✓	✓					✓	✓																												✓	✓			
RV							✓	✓	✓	✓			✓	✓	✓																												

NOTE: Although a variety of producer and processor associations, such as the [Northern Grain Growers Association](#), provide technical assistance service, we have not included these associations in this matrix.

Service Providers	Feasibility & Planning						Marketing						Accounting & Taxes						Legal & Estate Planning						Access to Capital					
	1	2	3	4	5	6	1	2	3	4	5	6	1	2	3	4	5	6	1	2	3	4	5	6	1	2	3	4	5	6
Vermont Small Business Development Center (SBDC)	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓													✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
University of Vermont (UVM) Extension and CSA	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Vermont Agency of Agriculture, Food and Markets (VAAFAM)									✓	✓	✓																			
Vermont Agriculture Mediation Program (VAMP)																				✓	✓	✓	✓	✓						
Vermont Association of Conservation Districts (VACD)																														
Vermont Community Action Agencies (VCAA)	✓	✓																							✓	✓				
Vermont Farm Bureau (VFB)								✓	✓	✓	✓			✓	✓	✓	✓													
Vermont Farm Viability Program (VFVP)		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓			✓	✓	✓	✓			✓	✓	✓	✓			✓	✓	✓	✓			✓	✓	✓	✓
Vermont Food Venture Center (VFVC)	✓	✓	✓	✓			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓																		
Vermont Land Trust (VLT)																						✓	✓	✓			✓	✓	✓	
Vermont Manufacturing Extension Center (VMEC)																														
Vermont Specialty Food Association (VSFA)								✓	✓	✓	✓																			
Vermont Sustainable Jobs Fund (VSJF)			✓	✓		✓		✓	✓	✓				✓	✓					✓	✓	✓				✓	✓	✓	✓	
Yankee Farm Credit (YFC)														✓	✓	✓	✓	✓								✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

KEY

1 - PRE-VENTURE	2 - START-UP	3 - GROWTH	4 - MATURITY	5 - REVITALIZATION	6 - SUCCESSION
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Service Providers	Human Resources						Regulations & Permits						Production / Processing & Energy						Packaging & Safety						Land Access						Infrastructure					
	1	2	3	4	5	6	1	2	3	4	5	6	1	2	3	4	5	6	1	2	3	4	5	6	1	2	3	4	5	6	1	2	3	4	5	6
SBDC							✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓																								
UVM		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
VAAFM	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓							✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
VAMD			✓	✓	✓	✓																														
VACD							✓	✓	✓	✓	✓			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓														✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
VCAA													✓	✓																		✓				
VFB																																				
VFVP															✓	✓	✓	✓									✓	✓	✓	✓			✓	✓	✓	✓
VFVC							✓	✓	✓	✓			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓							✓	✓						✓	✓				
VLT																										✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
VMEC															✓	✓	✓																			
VSFA																				✓	✓	✓	✓													
VSJF		✓	✓										✓	✓	✓	✓															✓	✓	✓			
YFC																																				

partnership among five organizations, along with the *Vermont Land Trust*, are making important strides in meeting the needs of new farmers. There are also not enough technical assistance providers supporting farmers to do timely succession planning.

Food system businesses need a variety of infrastructure, including buildings and equipment. For example, to engage in certain kinds of ecological tillage practices, farmers need access to specific equipment. They also need food safety equipment, such as vegetable washers. Meat processors need special equipment to process and package various cuts of meat. Technical assistance providers must understand these infrastructure needs and help businesses access essential land, buildings, and equipment.

🍏 Sales and Distribution

Because technical assistance providers often help producers and processors find appropriate sales and distribution channels, they must be familiar with market conditions and trends. During the F2P planning process, we learned of gaps in distribution; however these often stemmed from the fact that the scale and stage of the producers and the market outlets they were trying to reach were not in alignment. For example, a start-up vegetable grower wants to sell to a grocery store and feels frustrated by the lack of options. It may be that the grower needs to scale up production to access these large markets, package their product differently, or aggregate products with other small producers to provide the variety and quantity required by the marketplace. Technical assistance providers can help farms and businesses learn how to scale up production to access larger markets.

There is a need to organize technical assistance providers and their services by stage of business, scale and type of business, and desired market outlet framework, and to identify emerging service gaps based on new market demand. Technical assistance providers can also serve as matchmakers among producers, distributors, and market outlets, and provide producer readiness training to determine which markets should be targeted based on stage of development and the scale and type of enterprise. One farmer noted, “From my perspective as a producer, farmers are really good at producing stuff, but generally they don’t have the time or resources to take the next step of the processing, distribution, (and) marketing.”



Marketing assistance helps farmers reach new customers such as at this worksite farm stand.

PHOTO CREDIT: Vital Communities

🍏 Marketing and Public Outreach

During the F2P planning process, we routinely heard food producers indicate their wish for an easy way to find the technical assistance they needed in a timely manner. Many expressed not knowing where to turn to find support. As is the case in other economic sectors in the state, knowing how and where to access publicly supported technical assistance is not common. Marketing budgets for nonprofit organizations are typically small or nonexistent. Developing a web portal to help food system enterprises easily and quickly find the technical and business support they need would be of great value. The “Vermont Food System Atlas” is being developed to serve this function.

🍏 Technical Assistance and Business Planning

Throughout the F2P planning process, it was apparent that while some technical assistance service providers are very well connected, there is not a strong connection between providers of different types of services. For example, providers of business

planning services did not always know about all of the services available to improve soils and water quality, or about safety technology or production techniques. There is a need for more networking and professional development among service providers, and the development of a more intentional referral system. One of the functions of the Technical Assistance to Producers and Processors Working Group of the Farm to Plate Network is to create an avenue for more coordinated service delivery and a more robust referral network to ensure that clients get what they need, provide opportunities for professional development, and ensure that services and programs are of the highest quality and relevance.

Although the services and programs that exist appear to be sound, it would be beneficial to apply a more coordinated evaluation system across technical assistance service provider organizations.

Several organizations and programs, such as the Vermont Farm Viability Program, have evaluation measures and a standard method for collecting client evaluations. However, there is no standard way to evaluate the effectiveness of technical assistance services across programs and service providers (e.g., of all the organizations or providers working with beginning farmers, are some more effective than others in reaching desired outcomes?). It is not clear whether each organization or service provider has a set of broader outcomes it is trying to achieve across an entire client pool or whether desired outcomes are connected only to individual clients. Without a common evaluation system, it is difficult to determine how effective and efficient technical assistance services are, how much they affect the overall food system, and how they can adapt over time to better meet evolving client needs.

As Vermont food producers continue to transition, scale up, and diversify, there will be an ever greater need for new models of business management, legal structures, production, marketing, and so on. Overwhelmingly, technical assistance providers have expressed the need for farms to see themselves as businesses. During the F2P

“I keep dreaming that we’re going to have this A-Team to work with farmers that goes past the financials. Maybe they are retired farmers that have gone through things and are mentors to new farmers. With the A-Team you get business planning support, technical support, and experience in the fields that can reflect your goals.”

—Focus group participant

planning process, one participant noted: “I think it’s an identity crisis for all of these farms that are in transition. Analyzing the numbers to figure out what can be done at a higher volume and a lower price is challenging. I don’t think a lot of small, diversified farms have the analytical tools to make those decisions.”

Through the F2P planning process we also learned that many farms may not know their cost of production across various crops and animals. Enterprise budgeting across multiple products and services is a useful tool for decision making. Vermont service providers and farmers have some enterprise templates at their disposal (e.g., Richard Wiswall’s [The Organic Farmer’s Business Handbook](#) includes a CD with 24 crop budget spreadsheet templates), but it is not clear whether these templates are widely known about or used.

The issue of scaling up production also came up repeatedly. While some farmers are very content to stay at the scale they are currently operating at, others would like to access larger markets. Technical assistance providers should understand the structure of wholesale and retail markets and their “rules of the game” to help producers decide whether it could be feasible to scale up.

Food system businesses also may need help in determining what legal structure is the best fit for their values and how they may want their business to evolve. For example, in addition to standard LLCs, C-corporations, S-corporations, and cooperatives, new corporate legal models open to food enterprises include the low-profit limited liability corporations (L3C), benefit corporations, and the new mutual benefits corporation. It is unclear whether technical assistance providers have much knowledge about the pros and cons of these various legal structures or which legal professionals are in a position to suggest these structures to their clients.

Finally, many producer and processor associations provide business and technical assistance services. The service-providing capacities of these associations could be expanded and improved to better meet the needs of producers and processors.

Vermont Farm Viability Program (VFVP)

Perhaps long ago, in a simpler world, farmers needed only tools, the support of helping hands, a market for their products, and advice from their neighbors to successfully grow vegetables



and raise animals. But farmers today need a lot more than that. Complex equipment, well-designed facilities, marketing skills, and a business plan are just some of what's required for them to be truly "sustainable": to thrive today in order to exist tomorrow.

For 10 years, the *Vermont Farm Viability Program* (VFVP) has been providing technical assistance and grants to Vermont farmers, food producers, and other agricultural businesses so they can become more profitable and better managed. Businesses that want to expand, diversify, earn a higher income, become more efficient, or transition to new ownership can apply to the program and, if accepted, may:

- 🍏 receive two-year, in-depth, one-on-one business planning assistance;
- 🍏 receive individually tailored technical assistance to help them implement their business plan; and
- 🍏 apply for grants to fund capital expenses or additional technical support.

Private consultants and nonprofits contracted by VFVP provide the business planning and technical assistance, using methods developed jointly by VFVP and those partners. Primary non-profit providers are the *Intervale Center*, *Northeast Organic Farming Association of Vermont*, *UVM Extension*, and most recently, *Land for Good*.

Although a number of Vermont nonprofits offer business planning services that farmers could access, VFVP has developed specific farmer-focused guidelines for its partners. VFVP also evaluates the partners' work and provides them with four days of professional development trainings a year. The "implementation grants" then help businesses enrolled in the program purchase items or services that will make their business plan a reality (e.g., a walk-in cooler, a cultivation tractor, a hoop house). More than \$405,000 has been granted to 99 farms since 2003. Roughly \$194,000 has been granted to 19 agriculture-related businesses.

According to Ela Chapin, VFVP's program director, a majority of the 375 farms that have participated in the program since 2003 saw increases in gross sales and improved management practices the year after they launched their business plans.

Mimi Arnstein, who owns [Wellspring Farm](#), a CSA farm in Marshfield, says she thinks of herself not as a farmer but as a "farm business owner." Having received business planning support from VFVP in her farm's early years, as well as a grant to improve drainage on her farm, she now offers business plan mentoring to fellow farmers. "We need to make sure our numbers make sense so we're not working ourselves into the ground," Arnstein says. "There's a sense among the general population that farming is a labor of love but one that's grueling and masochistic. Well, sustainable farming can't be grueling and masochistic. We want farms that are going to survive into the future."

Arnstein says that when potential or existing farmers crunch the numbers, "the hard conclusion may sometimes be that this is not a viable business, so we might lose some farm businesses. But that's ok, because it will reduce failures and keep failures from happening before they begin."

Chapin notes a difference between technical assistance and education. The way she sees it, education is for people who aren't necessarily ready to practice what they're seeking information about. Technical assistance is for people who are already practicing a skill and want to improve it. She also notes that technical assistance, in VFVP's case, refers to information provided in a nonclassroom setting. VFVP's partner organizations often go directly to farms to provide on-site discussions and services.

VFVP is a program of the [Vermont Housing and Conservation Board](#), which funds it with assistance from the [USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service](#), [USDA Rural Development](#), and private foundations. VHCB took Farm Viability under its wing after the legislature created the program in 2003 because of VHCB's mission to conserve farmland.

"As VHCB is conserving land, Farm Viability is supporting businesses on the land. The two programs contribute to the presence of the working landscape," she says.

🍏 Financing

Vermont's business planning and technical assistance service providers need to understand, evaluate, and develop financially sustainable structures for their services. **Many business planning and technical assistance programs that are essential to the success of Vermont's food system are often underfunded or subject to rapid fluctuations in funding.**

For example, the *Vermont Farm Viability Program* (VFVP) has historically been supported by annual congressionally directed awards to VHCB. These funds are then awarded as contracts to four other organizations ([Intervale Center](#), [UVM Farm Viability](#), [NOFA Vermont](#), and [Land for Good](#)) that provide business planning services to farms. With the loss of federal earmarks, available funding for these essential programs is in question.

UVM's Dairy Management Team program is another example of a program with a lack of sufficient funding. This program was supported for two years with funding from VFVP and provided small stipends to the team facilitators. *UVM Extension* has been unable to maintain funding levels sufficient to support these teams or to expand the number of farms served by the program. One farmer remarked at a F2P planning session that "Extension . . . got half their funding cut. So as of now, a lot of Extension is being funded by the actual vegetable growers. We put down a good amount of money just because it's that valuable to us, but it's kind of ridiculous that they had to come with the old hat in hand to us."

Another participant commented, "The Agency of Agriculture and Agency of Natural Resources are constantly given more things to do, but not the funding to provide

"Vern (Grubinger, UVM Extension, Vermont Vegetable and Berry Growers Association) goes on vacation and it's a problem. We're really lucky because he's a good resource. Extension is hugely valuable. Obviously it's a big issue because it's shrinking in terms of available resources for Extension. The model is great with direct assistance in boots on the ground, farm on farm, come look at what I'm doing and help me. His e-mails are really good and there's a website of resources if you ever need them. Anything you could do to put money into Vern's work would be helpful."

— Focus group participant

people to do them. I think we need more people, and what surprises me is that people are one of the least expensive resources we can provide. To provide a full-time person to go out and work one-on-one with farmers doesn't take a lot of money."

At the same time, many of the business planning and technical assistance services in Vermont are provided free or at a subsidized cost. And, of course, the low margins of many food enterprises means that small and medium-scale operations often have very little cash available to pay for consultants. Vermont's business planning and technical assistance service providers need to identify the willingness to pay for services by stage of development, scale of operation, and type of product. For example, when food enterprises are growing rapidly, they often need the free or subsidized support to ensure their success, since any available cash is being pumped back into the business as fast as it is made. Typically, once a food enterprise reaches \$2 million in gross revenue and 8 to 10% profitability, it begins to have the cash flow needed to pay for consultants when needed.



Cheese-making workshop with Yvon Letcher.

🍏 Network Development

One of the purposes of the newly created Technical Assistance to Producers and Processors Working Group of the Farm to Plate Network is to facilitate information sharing, referrals, professional development, and coordinated services. When completed, the “Farm to Plate Food Systems Atlas” will provide a centralized, online, searchable database linked to all provider organizations’ websites.

🍏 Education

As the education system in Vermont develops to meet the needs of the evolving and expanding food system, technical assistance providers will need to coordinate with educational providers to ensure a seamless system, as well as look for ways to collaborate.

It is also important for the service provider community to annually assess the core competencies needed to best serve Vermont’s food system. Ongoing professional development programs for service providers would be a way to ensure that the best possible services are being delivered to clients.

🍏 Workforce Development

Technical assistance service providers must understand workforce and labor issues. By reducing non-worker-related input costs (e.g., energy, feed, etc.), business owners can place more emphasis on providing employees with better wages and benefits. Technical assistance providers who work with dairy farms should be up-to-date on H-2A guest worker regulations, to what extent their clients may depend on this workforce, and how to assist with hiring registered guest workers, if needed.

It became apparent during the F2P planning process that more skilled meat cutters are needed in the state. Since January 2011, a Meat Processing Task Force was established as part of the Technical Assistance to Producers and Processors Working Group. This task force helped coordinate a funding process which will create a new meat cutting training program to develop the workforce to meet the needs of the expanding meat production and processing industry in Vermont.



Governor signs H.21 Mutual Benefit Corporation Act, April 2012.

PHOTO CREDIT: Vermont Sustainable Jobs Fund

🍏 Regulatory and Public Policy

Food safety is becoming an increasing concern for both producers and consumers. It is important to continue to support efforts to help producers and processors obtain needed equipment and make building modifications to enable them to reach GAP standards or other food safety requirements, such as implementing HACCP plans.

GETTING TO 2020

Technical assistance services need to be relevant, accessible, effective, integrated, seamless, broad, adaptive, and nimble. The wide spectrum of business and technical assistance programs for food producers and processors must be maintained, improved, and expanded in order to reach many of the goals of the F2P Strategic Plan.

Following are a list of objectives and strategies which could be developed to meet the expanding needs of food system enterprises.

Table 4.4.2: Objectives and Strategies for Technical Assistance

OBJECTIVE	STRATEGY
Research Strategies	
Provide farms with knowledge and tools to mitigate and adapt to the effects of climate change.	Conduct research on the impacts of climate change and severe weather on production, and disseminate this information to help mitigate the effects of and help Vermonters adapt to the impacts of climate change. This research should include strategies that will also help make farms more viable, resilient, and risk-tolerant.
Technical Assistance and Business Planning Strategies	
Provide easy access and navigation to appropriate technical assistance providers.	Develop a centralized, coordinated online platform as a “one-stop shop” for food system businesses to easily find appropriate services, through the “Vermont Food System Atlas.”
	Develop a shared referral process between technical assistance programs to ensure that technical assistance providers are knowledgeable about all types of technical assistance available in Vermont.
Ensure that technical assistance providers are making a significant impact on Vermont’s food system businesses.	Continue to develop impact measures for technical assistance services to justify additional financial support for these services.
Ensure that technical assistance providers are meeting the needs of Vermont’s food system businesses.	Provide professional development and encourage co-learning and networking opportunities for technical assistance providers so they have the skills and understanding to adequately meet the needs of Vermont’s producers and food system businesses.
Develop streamlined farm finance programs that focus on cost of production analysis.	Encourage farmers to work with technical assistance providers as needed to focus specifically on farm finances, records, and analysis.
Improve production and business practices for farmers.	Provide 50% matching funds for farm management teams to work with farms throughout the state using skilled facilitators.
	Support programs that conduct workshops and provide one-on-one assistance for farmers involved in farm and/or farmland transfers, and ensure that these programs are coordinated and will continue to be funded.
	Disseminate existing and develop new detailed enterprise plan templates (e.g., budget calculator tools) for various diversification strategies including transition to organic production, on-farm liquid milk processing, biomass energy and forage crops, maple, livestock, value-added dairy products, grains, and high-demand large-scale fruits and vegetables.
Improve livestock production.	Support existing coordinated livestock management program efforts within the Vermont Farm Viability Program, UVM Extension/ Vermont Pasture Network, NOFA Vermont, and other livestock trade associations to improve winter management practices, carcass development, commercial hog production, and year-round beef and lamb production.

OBJECTIVE	STRATEGY
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Technical Assistance and Business Planning Strategies

<p>Scale up food system businesses so they can access specific markets.</p>	<p>Provide specialized scaling-up technical assistance and business planning services for farmers and value-added food entrepreneurs seeking to serve larger markets. Survey farmers to identify those interested in scaling up productions specifically for institutional markets and other market opportunities.</p>
<p>Increase the sale of locally produced food.</p>	<p>Encourage the formation of strategic partnerships between producers interested in scaling up to meet larger-scale markets and retailers interested in sourcing more local food (e.g., prebuy contracts similar to the CSA model, retailer and wholesaler investment in a producer’s storage or equipment, investing in a farmer-owned processing facility, and cooperative marketing).</p>

Financing Strategies

<p>Develop financially sustainable revenue models for business and technical assistance providers.</p>	<p>Identify the willingness to pay for technical assistance services and establish fees for service where possible.</p>
	<p>Secure stable funding sources for the Working Lands Enterprise Fund to ensure ongoing support for essential technical assistance programs.</p>
<p>Ensure that Vermont’s food system business owners receive ample support to meet state and federal regulations.</p>	<p>Provide sufficient state general funds to ensure that VAAFM can provide proactive technical assistance to help farmers and food entrepreneurs understand regulatory issues, and also to ensure that VAAFM can adequately enforce state and federal regulations.</p>
<p>Support the diversification and organic transition of conventional dairy farms.</p>	<p>Create a special multi-year farm transition fund and provide appropriate technical assistance to farmers who want to diversify or transition out of conventional milk production into other forms of production (e.g., organic milk, diversified vegetables, livestock, value-added products).</p>
<p>Foster food safety procedures so businesses can access markets with specific food safety standards.</p>	<p>Continue to support efforts to help producers and processors obtain needed equipment and make modifications to enable them to meet GAP, HACCP, and other food safety requirements (so they can access larger retail markets), and to provide additional food safety resources and educational opportunities to businesses.</p>

Network Development Strategies

<p>Strengthen producer and processor associations to maximize the technical assistance offered to producer and processors.</p>	<p>Identify ways to strengthen producer and processor associations by providing funding, training, and other resources to these associations.</p>
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CROSSCUTTING ISSUES

Food System Business Planning and Technical Assistance

Credits

4.4 Food System Business Planning and Technical Assistance was prepared by Erica Campbell, Ellen Kahler, Ela Chapin, Mark Cannella, and Londa Nwadike.

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Vermont Farm to Plate website: www.vtfarmtoplate.com



THE PLAN

THE NETWORK

GETTING TO 2020

THE ATLAS





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EXPLORE

VERMONT'S FOOD SYSTEM

CONSUMER DEMAND



FARM INPUTS



FOOD PRODUCTION



FOOD PROCESSING



WHOLESALE
DISTRIBUTION



RETAIL DISTRIBUTION



NUTRIENT
MANAGEMENT



FOOD SECURITY



FOOD SYSTEM
EDUCATION



WORKFORCE
DEVELOPMENT



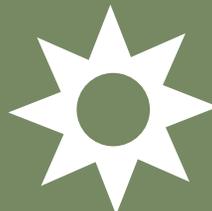
TECHNICAL
ASSISTANCE



FINANCING



RENEWABLE ENERGY



REGULATION



LEADERSHIP





CROSSCUTTING ISSUES

Food System Business Planning and Technical Assistance Service Provider Inventory

Business planning and technical assistance are services offered by many private consultants in Vermont, but this section focuses only on public organizations. At least 30 organizations provide technical assistance and some form of business planning for food system enterprises in Vermont, in addition to many trade and industry associations, advocacy groups, and private consultants. Based on public feedback during the F2P outreach process, Vermont food system enterprises value these services and believe the food system needs additional and more highly coordinated services to help them succeed over the next 10 years. What follows are brief descriptions of federal, state, quasi-governmental, educational institution, nonprofit organization, and trade association business and technical assistance programs that exist throughout the state.

🍏 Federal Government

🍷 USDA Farm Service Agency



There are nine county [Farm Service Agency](#) (FSA) offices primarily located in USDA Service Centers around the state with 55 employees dedicated to assisting all Vermont farms and helping to provide economic stability for Vermont producers. FSA provides federal program benefits such as annual operating loans and land purchases, commodity price supports, disaster relief, and conservation programs. Following Tropical Storm Irene in late August 2011, FSA conducted damage assessments and helped coordinate efforts to provide technical assistance to farmers impacted by the flood.

🍷 USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service



The [Natural Resources Conservation Service](#) (NRCS) provides technical and financial assistance to private landowners to address

resource-related issues (e.g., erosion, nutrient transport, animal manure problems) and to implement various conservation measures if problems arise. Its focus is on addressing resource problems relating to soil, water, animals, plants, and air, with a recently added area relating to energy efficiency. NRCS has statewide and regional staff members who work directly with farmers and landowners. They manage a host of programs.

- 🍏 NRCS's [Conservation Technical Assistance Program](#) (CTA) provides conservation planning services to farms, individuals, and groups (e.g., community conservation groups). This includes working with farmers to develop conservation goals for their farm and forest lands.
- 🍏 The [Agricultural Management Assistance Program](#) (AMA) helps to mitigate the risk of drought through funding for new irrigation systems and supports season extension through funding for high tunnels. There is a \$50,000 limit per farm, per fiscal year for these grant funds.
- 🍏 The [Conservation Stewardship Program](#) (CSP) rewards farmers who are good conservation stewards of their land by offering annual payments for maintaining or enhancing existing conservation practices or activities. Organic producers are encouraged to apply to the CSP.

- 🍏 The [*Environmental Quality Incentives Program*](#) (EQIP) promotes farm and forest production by enhancing the environmental quality of soil, water, air, plants, and animals. EQIP participants sign a 2- to 15-year contract and agree to install and maintain conservation practices to NRCS standards.
- 🍏 The [*Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program*](#) (WHIP) focuses on improving fish and wildlife habitat and restoring natural ecosystems. NRCS staff members work with farmers, providing technical assistance and resources to help implement conservation practices that improve wildlife habitat.
- 🍏 The [*Farm and Ranchland Protection Program*](#) (FRPP) works in partnership with eligible entities to protect agricultural lands through the purchase of development rights. NRCS contributes a percentage of the easement purchase based on the appraisal market value.
- 🍏 The [*Grassland Reserve Program*](#) (GRP) offers compensation for landowners to protect, restore, and enhance grasslands. The program seeks to obtain permanent easements for 10-, 15-, or 20-year rental contracts by making payments to farmers and landowners. This program requires a grazing management plan.
- 🍏 The [*Wetlands Reserve Program*](#) (WRP) promotes the protection and restoration of wetlands through the purchase of easements and enhancement activities. Sometimes this entails restoring current agricultural land to its original wetland state. NRCS provides a one-time easement payment and compensation for the cost of wetland restoration.

There is no cost involved with accessing these programs. NRCS primarily serves well-established agricultural operations, but also serves new and beginning farmers at all sizes of farm operation. In 2011, NRCS helped over 600 farms with some kind of assistance. In 2011, NRCS received 32 applications for the Agricultural Management Assistance program, obligating 3 contracts for \$141, 509. It received 592 applications for EQIP, obligating 358 contracts for \$7,294,709. NRCS works in close partnership with the *Vermont Housing and Conservation Board* (VHCB) to provide easements to help conserve farms and working lands for perpetuity.

🍏 State Government

🍏 Vermont Agency of Agriculture, Food and Markets

The [*Vermont Agency of Agriculture, Food and Markets*](#) (VAAFAM) provides a variety of technical assistance programs aimed at promoting best practices, regulatory compliance, health and safety, and on-farm energy efficiency and renewable energy.



The goal of the [*Farm Agronomics Program*](#) (FAP) is to provide Vermont farms with state financial assistance for the implementation of soil-based practices that improve soil quality, increase crop production, and reduce erosion and agricultural waste discharges. FAP provides ongoing assistance with nutrient management plan updates and maintenance. The staff also conducts outreach on agricultural water quality impacts and regulations through educational and instructional activity grants.

VAAFAM's [*Plant Industry Section*](#) is part of the Agricultural Resource Management and Environmental Stewardship division. Plant Industry is a technical assistance and regulatory branch of the agency and works to detect, intercept, and control plant and insect pests that threaten Vermont's native plant and agriculture resources. The Plant Industry Section covers areas such as: entomology, plant pathology, cooperative agricultural pest survey, plant exportation and importation permitting, diagnostic laboratory, vector management, nursery inspection and licensing, domestic and federal plant quarantines, seed certification, integrated pest management (IPM), genetically modified seeds/organisms, apiary inspection, and plant and pest quarantines.

Although several organizations provide technical assistance to improve environmental quality (e.g., NRCS, *Vermont Association of Conservation Districts*, etc.), environmental regulations for the food sector are mainly monitored by VAAFAM. These include pesticides, feed, seeds, and fertilizers. VAAFAM administers the state's agricultural water quality programs including Accepted Agricultural Practices (AAP), the Medium Farm Operations (MFO) program, and the Large Farm Operations (LFO) program. It also provides technical and financial assistance to farmers to implement Best Management Practices (BMP) to ensure compliance with these programs.

— Vermont Agency of Commerce and Community Development



The [Vermont Agency of Commerce and Community Development](#) (ACCD) offers an online resource guide for

Vermont's business community that includes information on funding, regulations, energy, technology, taxes and business resources. ACCD's [Vermont Training Program](#) also provides funds for training of employees in new and existing businesses in the sectors of manufacturing, which can include food manufacturing. These individually designed training programs may include on-the-job, classroom, skill upgrade, or other specialized trainings that are mutually agreed upon between the state and employer. ACCD also supports the *Vermont Small Business Development Center*, which provides free business and financial planning services to food enterprises.

— Vermont Association of Conservation Districts



There are 14 regional natural resource conservation districts in the [Vermont Association of Conservation Districts](#). A conservation district is a division of state government established under state law to conserve and wisely manage resources and partners with state and federal agencies to deliver a variety of services. Conservation districts partner closely with the Natural Resources Conservation Service to

provide capital for conservation projects as well as technical assistance related to water and land conservation practices, including grazing, manure management, soil enhancement, and storm water management.

Conservation districts have Agricultural Resource Specialist (ARS) staff who assist producers by evaluating farms and recommending methods for lessening the environmental impacts of farm operations. ARS staff members are knowledgeable about Vermont's Accepted Agricultural Practices and Best Management Practices and work with producers to meet the state environmental regulations. ARS staff members provide environmental assessments of farm operations, manure management, winter spreading ban exceptions, water sampling, and information about funding to assist producers in implementing suggested changes.

Assistance is also available on manure management, proper siting of manure storage or composting facilities, and technical information on water quality issues including free water quality sampling and monitoring.

Conservation District Land Treatment and Conservation Program Implementation (LTCPI) planning staff assist VAAFM and NRCS by developing and implementing land treatment plans and comprehensive nutrient management plans. This involves working with local farmers on conservation crop rotations, pasture and hayland planting, cover crops, field strip-cropping, riparian forest buffers, pest management, nutrient management, fencing, pipelines, and other practices requiring tree planting.

🍷 Quasi-Governmental Organizations

— Efficiency Vermont



[Efficiency Vermont](#) delivers energy efficiency programs, including assistance for food system businesses. This program provides technical assistance in energy conservation, helping food system

businesses save on utility and energy bills. It serves between 100 and 200 businesses per year in its Agricultural Program. The technical assistance offered by *Efficiency Vermont* is "free" to the customer in the sense that everyone in Vermont who pays an electric bill pays into the Energy Efficiency utility charge, which funds the program. *Efficiency Vermont* often refers people to and collaborates with the Vermont offices of the USDA and NRCS, VHC's *Farm Viability Program*, and the *Renewable Energy Resource Center of Vermont*.

— Vermont Housing and Conservation Board — Vermont Farm Viability Program



VHCB's [Vermont Farm Viability Program](#) serves as an umbrella program for farmers across the state, delivering assistance through several program partners (*Intervale Center, UVM Extension, NOFA*

Vermont, and *Land for Good*) as well as directly via private consultants. This program provides in-depth business planning and technical assistance to all kinds of farmers, as well as certain kinds of food system businesses.

Service providers in the *Vermont Farm Viability Program* encourage innovation and entrepreneurial thinking while helping farmers identify goals, analyze business strengths and weaknesses, create complete sets of financial statements, and develop comprehensive business plans. The program also provides assistance in implementing business plans, through technical assistance and a grants implementation program. Services available include business planning, farm transfer planning, estate and retirement planning, enterprise analysis, and cash flow projections. As a part of the planning process, business owners can explore value-added product development and marketing, business diversification, farm management improvement programs and practices, improving net earnings, financial record-keeping, financial statement development, and marketing strategies.

A \$75 enrollment fee is currently charged to farmers participating in the program. Vermont farmers with two years of farm management and \$10,000 or more of gross farm income in the previous year are eligible to apply.

"I cannot help but stress the importance of this program [VHCB Farm Viability Program] for small Vermont farms. For us it has made the difference between a bust and a breakthrough year. It has negated some of the stress that farmers bear because of the weather and other unpredictable variables. It has helped to make us better financial planners. It has let us concentrate our efforts into growing the farm instead of looking for outside work in January which has, in the past, added to burnout, stress, and an inability to move projects forward."

— Rosemary Croizet, Berry Creek Farm, Westfield

— Vermont Small Business Development Center



[Vermont Small Business Development Center](#) (VT-SBDC) is a statewide nonprofit organization that provides small businesses with free business and financial planning. VT-SBDC works with a breadth of food

system businesses, as well as other kinds of small businesses. Their business advisors offer a variety of technical assistance services including value-added production and food processing through one-on-one assistance and workshops.

VT-SBDC, in a joint arrangement with the *Center for an Agricultural Economy's Vermont Food Venture Center* (VFVC), provides free business planning to pre-venture and start-up businesses, as well as growing and diversifying businesses, throughout the Northeast Kingdom. Any business interested in utilizing the VFVC can access these free services. As of September 2011, over 30 businesses had expressed interest in VFVC, and many of these were in the pre-venture stage.

— Regional Development Corporations

[Regional Development Corporations](#) (RDCs) work with local communities and businesses to promote industrial expansion and encourage the development of new jobs. Some RDCs help food system businesses identify commercial space as well as low-interest loans through revolving loan fund programs. For example, two economic development corporations in the Northeast Kingdom provide a wide variety of support to food system businesses. The *Northeastern Vermont Development Association* has provided technical assistance and financial support to food system businesses, including the VFVC. The *Northern Communities Investment Corporation* (NCIC) offers a variety of services to food system businesses including business planning, financial planning, and infrastructure grants and loans, and has supported businesses including the *Cellars at Jasper Hill*. The *Addison County Economic Development Corporation* and the *Franklin County Industrial Corporation* have helped food manufacturers and dairy cooperatives find new production space and obtain Community Development Block Grant funding. And the *Brattleboro Development Credit Corporation* was instrumental in helping to bring *Commonwealth Dairy* to Vermont in 2011.

— Vermont Community Action Agencies



The [*Micro Business Development Program*](#) (MBDP) is a statewide program run by the five Vermont Community Action Agencies. Vermont MBDP provides education and counseling to Vermonters striving to start or expand microbusinesses — including food system businesses. Since 1988 the program has assisted over 4,000 people (3,000 of whom were low-income individuals) with their plans

to start or expand microbusinesses. The program offers a variety of classes on business planning, communication skills, commerce, bookkeeping, management, and tax planning. Since its inception, the program has also provided businesses with over \$2 million in financing.

— Vermont Sustainable Jobs Fund



Vermont Sustainable Jobs Fund

The [*Vermont Sustainable Jobs Fund*](#) (VSJF) is a statewide nonprofit organization that provides early-stage grant funding, technical

assistance, and loans to entrepreneurs, businesses, farmers, networks and others interested in developing goods and services and creating sustainable jobs in the state. VSJF offers two technical assistance programs to Vermont's food system businesses.

- [*Peer-to-Peer Collaborative*](#) (P2P): VSJF's CEO mentorship program assembles a team of three accomplished Peer Advisors (CEOs, COOs, and CFOs) who work with a business owner over a 12- to 18-month period. These Peer Advisors help to better define business strategies, better understand company financial drivers and opportunities, and grow leadership skills in keeping with the company's needs. This program is for Vermont-based businesses in the green economy (including food system businesses) that have between \$1 and \$15 million in sales and are growing at a slow to moderate pace.

- [*Vermont Agricultural Development Program*](#) (VADP): This program supports the growth and long-term success of Vermont-based, value-added agricultural enterprises that are building markets and infrastructure for other Vermont agricultural businesses. VADP provides venture coaching to a small number of select businesses each year to help them obtain the right match of growth capital (e.g., debt, subordinated debt, convertible debt, equity, royalty financing) for their size, scale, and stage of business. VADP also partners with other business service providers such as VT-SBDC, regional development corporations, *UVM Extension*, and others as needed to help businesses in their efforts to grow and expand. VADP services include: wrap-around growth and expansion assessment; planning and financial assistance; readiness consulting designed to prepare agricultural entrepreneurs for raising capital; identifying and linking agricultural entrepreneurs to technical assistance not directly tied to raising capital; networking emerging businesses and their managers with more seasoned leaders of mature agriculture-related businesses; and networking entrepreneurs with a variety of capital providers within and outside the region.

— Vermont Manufacturing Extension Service (VMEC)



The [*Vermont Manufacturing Extension Service*](#) (VMEC) works to improve manufacturing in Vermont (including food manufacturing) and strengthen the competitiveness of the state's smaller manufacturers. This is done through confidential consulting, coaching, hands-on implementation assistance, and training. The goal is to help Vermont manufacturers achieve profitable growth through innovation, increase their productivity, improve manufacturing and business processes, and reduce costs, while creating and retaining good-paying jobs. VMEC has particular expertise in lean manufacturing and helps businesses greatly improve their overall production process flows.

🍏 Educational Institutions

🍏 University of Vermont



University of Vermont (UVM) Extension Service offers a wide variety of technical assistance to Vermont's farmers and food processors, such as start-up and business planning, transition planning, production techniques, and food safety. Its primary audience is farmers and food processing businesses.

UVM Extension also provides a wide range of educational programs and resources, from farm finances and tax reporting to specific agricultural needs of farmers. It also offers a variety of information including agricultural labor management, agricultural risk management, insurance and tax information, family farm succession, farm business management, food safety, and services for farmers with disabilities. Besides the many programs listed next, UVM Extension also conducts regional technical assistance projects, such as the Northeast Kingdom Dairy Viability Program that serves dairy farms in that region.

- 🍏 *UVM Extension Farm Viability Program*: UVM is a *Vermont Farm Viability Program* partner provider and also manages its own Dairy Management Team programs. The *UVM Extension Farm Viability Program* offers business planning and technical assistance services to Vermont farmers, as part of a statewide effort to improve the economic viability of Vermont agriculture. Once enrolled, farmers meet and work with a "lead" Extension farm business planner usually over a 4- to 12-month period to produce a written business plan and receive other forms of technical assistance services that include risk management planning and farm financial analysis. In the second year, farmers who have completed a full business plan are provided with ongoing technical assistance in evaluating their progress in implementing their plan and its recommended practices. In some cases, farms that meet certain additional eligibility requirements may receive planning and technical assistance services that are directly funded by the VHCB through the *Vermont Farm Viability Program*. Farms that complete a business plan under this expanded program may, when funding is available, be eligible for grants toward capital expenses or technical assistance essential to implementing their completed business plans.

The Dairy Management Team (DMT) program provides a group of specialists to help improve the performance of a specific dairy business. *UVM Extension* provides facilitators that coordinate monthly or quarterly meetings with key advisors invested in the business. These teams often include a veterinarian, loan officer, feed salesperson, and independent specialists. The program seeks to identify key issues facing the dairy and produce relevant short-term management strategies that improve the business. The DMT program serves approximately 20 farms per year in Vermont.

The UVM Farm Viability Program has a participant enrollment fee is currently \$75. The program served over 100 farms in 2011. Fifty of these farms were funded directly through the VHCB program, and the remaining farm projects were funded by Extension. The UVM Farm Viability Program has funding from several other public and private sources. It tracks improvements in profit, diversification, quality of life, and management and production practices.

- 🍏 *Center for Sustainable Agriculture*: *UVM Extension's Center for Sustainable Agriculture* focuses on addressing farmers' immediate and longer-term needs through technical assistance, research, policy, the support of local networks, and leadership. Its Farm Enterprise program is part of the *Vermont Farm Viability Program*.

The Center also has a *Produce Safety & GAPs (Good Agricultural Practices)* program that provides on-farm food safety development assistance for produce growers. It is helping Vermont produce growers address recent market concerns about food safety for fresh whole produce. This safety program provides education and direct technical support and conducts research. It also helps to coordinate communication among stakeholders on evolving USDA rules related to Good Agricultural Practices (GAP).

The *Center for Sustainable Agriculture* also coordinates *Land Access Programs* in Vermont. It currently provides farmland access and tenure consulting and coaching — both for farmers looking to acquire or lease land, and for landowners interested in making their land available for farmers. The Center provides education through publications and workshops on topics such as farm prospecting, farmland purchase and leasing, land stewardship, farm

financing, business planning, and land use regulations. The Center also runs the Vermont Agriculture Land Access Database. This site helps match farmers or aspiring farmers seeking land, farms, or farm employment opportunities to landowners or farm employers. UVM Extension staff members help connect these individuals, while providing information and resources.

The Center houses the [UVM Pasture Program](#), which provides staff support to *Vermont Pasture Network* activities, as well as independent research and education. The goal of the program is to promote and enhance sustainable grass-based livestock farming through improvements in soil, water, and forage quality and profitability by working with farmers and other partners to provide research, information, technical support, and educational opportunities, including grazing workshops and annual Vermont Grazing Conference.

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[Women's Agricultural Network](#): Through a series of educational, technical assistance, and networking opportunities, WAgN works to increase the number of women owning and operating profitable farms and agriculture-related businesses. It also works to increase the profile of women in leadership positions throughout the agricultural sectors of business, government, and community. Program services range from developing and assessing a business idea through the advanced planning and implementation phases. In collaboration with the UVM New Farmer Project, WAgN offers several courses for women farmers in various stages of growing their business. Growing Places is a course offered online for aspiring and start-up farmers. Building a Sustainable Business is a course to help write a business plan. Introduction to Ag Financial Management is a course for all farmers interested in financial management basics.



new farmers in creating successful agricultural businesses. By collaborating among departments within the Extension and partners in the nonprofit and government organizations serving farmers, the project focuses on compiling the most relevant information for new farmers and making this highly accessible through its website. This highly collaborative effort works to avoid the duplication of efforts, and where possible, to identify and fill gaps in services. The [Resource Guide for Vermont's Aspiring and Beginning Farmers](#) explains the services organizations and agencies provide, and how these services are relevant to beginning farmers.



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[Food Safety Program](#): UVM Extension's food safety program works across the food system, from farm to table, to assist in supporting a safe and nutritious food supply. The UVM Extension food safety program works with farmers, maple syrup producers, small-scale food processors, meat processors, and other stakeholders to improve the safety of the food produced and processed throughout the state of Vermont.
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[Agronomy & Conservation Assistance Program \(ACAP\)](#): This program is a collaborative effort of the *Vermont Agency of Natural Resources (ANR)*, *UVM Extension*, and the *Poultney-Mettowee Conservation District*. The goal of ACAP is to devote three staff agronomists to provide direct technical assistance to animal agriculture operations in three regions of the Lake Champlain watershed, and to implement farm practices that will minimize adverse effects of agricultural operations, thus improving the water quality in Lake Champlain and tributaries. The staff agronomists advise participating farmers on topics such as crop production to reduce erosion and nutrient loss from fields, farmstead best management practices for improved manure and water management, fencing to keep livestock away from water resources, reducing phosphorus runoff using soil aeration and alternative manure application systems, whole-farm nutrient balances, and other identified Best Management Practices (BMP).

— Vermont Technical College



[Vermont Technical College](#) (VTC) offers a wide selection of courses and matriculated programs for farmers or those interested in becoming farmers. These programs are covered in [Chapter 4, Section 2: Education](#). The college's

[Vermont Tech Enterprise Center](#) is a business incubator specifically designed with flexible leases and a unique mix of space and services to support growth companies. Its staff is from the [Vermont Small Business Development Center](#) and VTC.

— Career and Technical Education Centers

While [Career and Technical Education](#) (CTE) centers offer programs for high school-age students, they also offer technical and business courses for adults such as Microsoft Excel for Farmers. Sometimes other service providers, such as VT-SBDC, use the classrooms of CTE centers to offer classes and workshops for food system businesses. CTE programs for new and experienced food system business owners are discussed in [Chapter 4, Section 2](#) and [Chapter 4, Section 3](#).

🍄 Statewide and Regional Nonprofit Organizations

— Land for Good



[Land for Good](#) is a nonprofit organization that offers education and assistance to owners and managers of working lands, new farmers, and other land use decision makers in the six New England states. [Land for Good](#) offers technical assistance to farm

seekers, farm exiters (transfer planning), and nonfarming landowners. In most cases they charge a fee-for-service, ranging from a few hundred to several thousand dollars, based on a \$90/hour rate that covers labor, direct operating costs, and overhead. However, they also offer "cost-share" (subsidy) to eligible clients. The Land Here! program caters to prospective, start-up, and existing farmers seeking land. Within the Farm Transfer Planning program, [Land for Good](#) serves those preparing to exit farming.

[Land for Good](#) makes contact with hundreds of farmers each year throughout New England through workshops and online resources. They average about 40 or more cases of direct technical assistance per year, ranging from in-depth consultation to technical assistance over the telephone. [Land for Good](#) collaborates with a wide variety of providers, including land trusts, attorneys, financial planners, lenders, [UVM Extension](#), state agencies, land use planners, estate planners, business planning courses, land link programs, and beginning farmer programs.

— Vermont Land Trust



The [Vermont Land Trust](#) (VLT) is a statewide nonprofit organization providing technical expertise in land transfer and sale of development rights, as well as some business planning assistance to farm businesses in the process of selling development rights. VLT's [Farmland Access Program](#) helps provide farmers with opportunities to purchase or lease affordable farmland so they can start up or expand agricultural businesses. VLT connects people with farms as they come on the market, and sometimes purchases farms to resell to farmers or purchases conservation easements to make farmland more affordable. VLT also works to expand farm leasing opportunities.

VLT helps farm seekers secure business planning services through the [Farm Viability Program](#), and assists in securing the appraisal work necessary for land purchases. VLT also works with farm lenders to evaluate opportunities, helps facilitate farmland transactions, and assists farm seekers through the process of purchasing a farm. The costs of VLT services are generally covered through grants and donations. Additional funds are also raised to help cover a variety of costs, including conservation easements. Participants in the VLT Farmland Access Program usually have between 3 and 10 years of experience in agricultural production and are looking for a farm to buy. VLT helps with the purchase or development of 30 to 40 farms a year, and five or six of these are typically Farmland Access Program farms. It also conducts monitoring visits to over 700 farm parcels each year.

🔑 Intervale Center

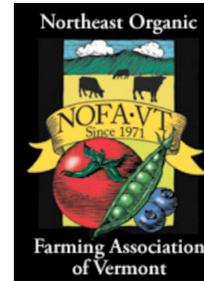


The [*Intervale Center*](#) is a nonprofit organization with a nationally and internationally recognized farm incubator program. The *Intervale* provides technical assistance to start-up farms that are using the incubator as well as in-depth business planning and technical assistance to more mature farm businesses around the state through the its Success on Farms program (funded through a contract with the *Farm Viability Program*).

- 🍏 The [*Intervale Farms Program*](#) leases land, equipment, greenhouses, irrigation and storage facilities to small independent farms that agree to farm organically. Currently, 13 farms operate on 120 acres with over 60 full-time and seasonal workers. Farmers have access to an assortment of technical and mechanical support as well as the benefit of marketing programs and business planning resources to help them establish themselves as profitable businesses. The Farms Program removes start-up barriers that typically challenge new farmers, including access to training, land, capital, markets, and knowledge of equipment operation and maintenance. Each year, between one and three new farm businesses join the program, receiving subsidized rental rates, business planning support, and mentoring from established growers.
- 🍏 The [*Success on Farms Program*](#) is a two-year business planning program that helps Vermont farm operations improve their viability. The Success on Farms provider works one-on-one with selected farmers throughout the state, providing specialized support and business planning assistance to help farmers expand their markets, increase revenues, and achieve other quality of life goals that are critical to keeping them in farming. The program seeks to enhance not just the profitability of farms, but also their social and environmental sustainability. Specialized support may include strategic planning, farm financial planning, bookkeeping and accounting, and refinement of production systems. Success on Farms utilizes skilled program staff, business consultants, and veteran growers to support the development

of participants' business plans. Each year it works with a diversity of farmers, including vegetable growers, fruit growers, dairy farms, livestock producers, and value-added producers. Generally, farm businesses have been established for three years before enrolling in Success on Farms.

🔑 Northeastern Organic Farming Association - Vermont



[*NOFA Vermont*](#) is a statewide nonprofit organization focused on assisting organic farms or farms that are transitioning to organic practices. It also manages the organic certification program for the state. It has a technical assistance program that is primarily focused on in-depth business planning and technical assistance through the *Farm Viability Program*. It also assists with transitioning to organic farming, grazing and pasture planning, and offers a wide variety of workshops and conferences for producers.

The *NOFA Vermont* Dairy and Livestock Technical Assistance Program assists Vermont dairy and livestock farmers of all types and sizes to help determine whether certified organic management is best suited for their farms in terms of resources and goals. This program helps farmers design economically viable and ecologically sound whole farm plans to transition to and sustain certified organic management. It also teaches management strategies that will sustain and improve certified organic management goals.

The Technical Assistance Program provides services such as the following: visits to farms considering transitioning to organic or purchasing an organic herd, financial analysis of transition costs, web-based information on the economics of organic production and organic standards, business information on the Vermont organic dairy transition loan program, and workshops for farmers and service providers. *NOFA Vermont* also helps connect farmers with other organizations and resources.

In addition, *NOFA Vermont* offers farm financial and business resources, including the Farmer Emergency Fund, the *NOFA Vermont* Revolving Loan Fund, and the Energy Loan Fund. The Energy Loan Fund helps farmers improve their energy use technologies and develop energy management plans for their farms. It also offers business planning and cash flow analysis.

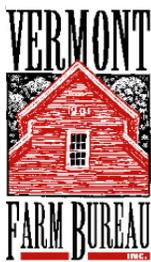
— Fork Rural Vermont



[Rural Vermont](#) is a statewide nonprofit organization that provides support to farmers on policy issues. They manage and activate a Farm Policy Network, a group of Vermonters actively engaged in the democratic process and committed to preserving rural heritage and promoting local food systems. *Rural Vermont* provides information and resources to farmers and the public about issues impacting rural communities. It also advocates through collaborative efforts

locally, statewide, and nationally to ensure that policies strengthen family farms, sustain rural communities, and promote local food sovereignty.

— Fork Vermont Farm Bureau



The Vermont Agricultural Resource Center at the [Vermont Farm Bureau](#) provides business services to a number of nonprofit agricultural organizations in the state through an industry/government partnership. By collaborating with other organizations, it is able to offer services and supplies at group rates that are substantially less than market price. Services include accounting services; coordination and mailing of newsletters, brochures and correspondence; the layout and design of newsletters; the creation and maintenance of databases of association members; and limited clerical support.

— Fork Farmer's Watershed Alliance (FWA)



The [Farmer's Watershed Alliance](#) (FWA) of Franklin and Grand Isle Counties provides technical assistance to farmers seeking to improve water quality protection practices on the farm. The goals of the alliance include providing farmers with a support network, helping farmers

understand environmental regulations, providing farmers with non-regulatory technical assistance, helping farmers develop nutrient management plans, providing farmers with whole farm assessments, and staying connected to the actions of the legislature. FWA also works to promote and defend dairy farming to further its future as one of the largest contributors to the state's economy.

— Fork Rutland Area Farm and Food Link (RAFFL)



[RAFFL](#) is working to link new farmers with the resources they need to succeed. This includes linking folks with business planning and technical resources; organizing training sessions for beginning farmers in the Rutland region; hosting mixers for new farmers to meet and network with each other; and advertising land rental, business transition, and other opportunities. An important goal of RAFFL is to expand the number and breadth of farms in the Rutland region.

RAFFL also holds an annual Farmers' Gathering and Resource Fair that includes workshops that connect farmers with institutional buyers, explore strategies for scaling up production, address the importance of farm food safety plans, and offer expertise and ideas for on-farm composting and hiring farm employees. At this event, over 25 agricultural service providers, including lenders, business planners, technical assistance providers, marketing organizations, and conservation leaders provide information on resources available to help farmers.

— Fork Vermont Food Venture Center



The [Vermont Food Venture Center](#) (VFVC) is currently a program of the *Center for an Agricultural Economy*, in Hardwick. VFVC is a commercial kitchen incubator facility for start-up or

relatively small specialty food producers. VFVC provides microbusiness consulting, access to rental kitchen and equipment, storage, and distribution. VFVC also provides access to food scientists, packaging specialists and others. Its rates vary depending on the type and scope of services. It also offers longer-term space leases for medium-sized businesses.

— Environmental Mediation Center, Vermont Agricultural Mediation Program



The [Vermont Agricultural Mediation Program](#) (AMP) administers the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s certified mediation programs for Vermont and New Hampshire. It provides free mediation services to the agricultural

community so disputes do not end up in court. AMP helps farmers with disputes over adverse decisions from USDA agencies, compliance issues with USDA farm and conservation programs, farm and rural development loans, wetlands determinations, crop insurance, pesticide issues, and other agricultural disputes. Mediation of these issues reduces the time and money farmers spend on more involved legal processes.

— Cellars at Jasper Hill



The [Cellars at Jasper Hill](#) is a private enterprise that provides technical assistance to cheesemakers, both those that are current clients (aging cheese at the *Cellars*) and

start-up operations. Support services and technical training include recipe development and design; cheese technology; influences of milk type and composition in cheesemaking; affinage, food safety, and hygiene in cheesemaking; systems, facility and process analysis; and troubleshooting (acidification defects, contamination, process controls, corrections, monitoring and documentation). *The Cellars* also produces Jasper Hill cheese varieties at the *Food Venture Center*, where its staff teaches cheese-making skills to new and existing Vermont cheesemakers.

— Highfields Center for Composting



The [Highfields Center for Composting](#) provides technical services for on-farm composting and comprehensive food waste recycling programs, which includes action-based environmental education. Technical assistance includes site design and permitting, management plan

development, compost recipe development, and bedded pack barn planning and implementation. In 2011 Highfields offered a Compost Operator Certification Course for current and future compost site operators. This course provided the opportunity for participants, including farmers, to gain a Compost Operator Certificate required by the *Agency of Natural Resources* to obtain a solid waste permit for handling food scraps.

— Yankee Farm Credit



[Yankee Farm Credit](#) offers fee-based financial and business management services to customers and members of the financial cooperative. It provides tax, payroll, and record-keeping services, as well as offers loans insurance, life insurance, leases, and financial software to farms in Vermont.

🍷 Producer and Processor Associations

Vermont has a wide array of producer trade associations. These groups provide peer-to-peer support through meetings, workshops, resource sharing, and networking opportunities. Some provide technical assistance services for specific industries.

— Vermont Specialty Foods Association



The [Vermont Specialty Foods Association](#) (VSFA) serves as a networking forum to link producers and buyers through its online Sourcebook. VSFA provides a monthly newsletter and offers members an e-mail listserv for posting

questions, a mentoring program for new members, and industry meetings and events where producers can meet in person. VSFA helps members promote their products at several key events and industry shows, and offers financial assistance to industry shows when it is able to qualify for various grants. VSFA also co-sponsors the Vermont Matchmaker event each fall that brings buyers and producers together for short buying sessions. VSFA members are also automatically members of the *Vermont Grocers’ Association* (VGA), the trade association of food retailers throughout Vermont. Through this affiliation with the VGA, members have access to credit card processing,

health and dental insurance, a dividend potential business insurance plan, and shipping. VSFA provides members with pertinent workshops and educational opportunities at its annual meeting and other times during the year.

 **Other Statewide Producer and Processor Associations:**

-  [Northern Grain Growers Association](#)
-  [Vermont Beef Producers Association](#)
-  [Vermont Beekeepers Association](#)
-  [Vermont Brewers Association](#)
-  [Vermont Cheese Council](#)
-  [Vermont Dairy Herd Improvement Association](#)
-  [Vermont Farms! Association](#)
-  Vermont Feed Dealers and Manufacturers Association
-  [Vermont Grass Farmers Association](#)
-  Vermont Holstein Association
-  [Vermont Institute for Artisan Cheese](#)
-  [Vermont Maple Sugar Makers Association](#)
-  Vermont Meat and Poultry Processors Association
-  Vermont Poultry Association
-  [Vermont Sheep and Goat Association](#)
-  Vermont Turkey Growers Association
-  [Vermont Vegetable and Berry Growers Association](#)