

2021

SUCCESS STORIES FROM THE FIELD

HOW STATE AND FEDERAL PROGRAMS SUPPORT FARMERS, FISHERMEN, FOOD ENTREPRENEURS, AND CONSUMERS IN THE NORTHEAST



(Credit: Grow Pittsburgh)

Grow Pittsburgh's twice-weekly farmstand in Braddock, PA provides the community with fresh, affordable, local produce.

The big story of 2020 was the COVID-19 pandemic, and this document illustrates the many ways farmers, food businesses, distributors, and farm supporters rose to meet the moment. As supply chains were upended, traditional ways of shopping made less safe, and institutions and businesses closed, the organizations profiled here proved their indispensability in supporting farmers and advancing food security. Our region continued to address other pressing issues, too: advancing the fight against climate change, promoting new business models to find their

economic footing as refugees, and honing systems to make local foods accessible for all.

We offer the following report to demonstrate the value that our farmers and local food organizations provide to the Northeast, and, in turn, the value that state and federal policies provide to them in helping them do their work. We also share some ideas from practitioners about how some of these policies can be improved to support a Northeast food system that is fair, resilient, and sustainable.

This document is a collaborative effort of the following organizations: American Farmland Trust, Community Food Funders, Hartford Food System/CT Food System Alliance, The John Merck Fund, Land For Good, Maine Farmland Trust, National Sustainable Agriculture Coalition, New Entry Sustainable Farming Project, Northeast Sustainable Agriculture Working Group, Pasa Sustainable Agriculture, and Public Health Solutions.



(Credit: New Roots Cooperative Farm)
New Roots Cooperative Farm in Lewiston, Maine.

LEADING THE WAY FOR IMMIGRANT ENTREPRENEURS WITH A FARM COOPERATIVE

In Lewiston, Maine, [Cooperative Development Institute \(CDI\)](#) supported New Americans Mohamed Abukar, Batula Ismail, Seynab Ali, and Jabril Abdi in founding New Roots Cooperative Farm, the first immigrant-owned cooperative in Maine, with funding from [USDA's Outreach for Socially and Disadvantaged Farmers and Ranchers Program](#) and a [USDA Rural Development Socially Disadvantaged Groups Grant](#), as well as from private philanthropy.

The four met as farmers ten years ago via the New American Sustainable

Agriculture Project operated by the non-profit Cultivating Community at Packard-Littlefield Farm in Lisbon, Maine. The NASA project empowers New Americans to launch independent farm businesses, adopt new leadership roles in the community, and attain increased economic independence for themselves and their families.

Refugees from Somalia, the farmers used their agricultural roots and their cultural understanding of cooperative principles – in Somali language, *iskaashi* means a “cooperation,” which intends

to create shared values by developing business models designed to benefit everyone – to demonstrate to other immigrant farmers how their co-op model can meet their needs and build community. With CDI's support, New Roots Cooperative Farm has become a successful business in a competitive market and a strong model for other New Americans in Lewiston. “Our aim is not only to grow food and run a business ourselves but to help our community and teach them about how to run a business,” says New Roots farmer, Batula Ismail.

ESSENTIAL BUSINESSES CONTINUE TO FEED THEIR NEIGHBORS AND SUPPORT FARMERS

In March 2020, as the COVID pandemic re-organized the way people shopped, cooked, and socialized, Connecticut officials quickly **designated farmers' markets as “essential businesses”** to keep them open during the shut-down. This maintained farmers' livelihoods, provided fresh food to residents, and offered a sense of normalcy during a turbulent season.

Government nutrition programs help make Connecticut's farmers markets more accessible. [Nearly all of Connecticut's farmers' markets participate in the Farmers' Market Nutrition Program \(FMNP\)](#), meaning they accept **Women, Infant and Children (WIC) and Senior Farmers Market Nutrition Program (SFMNP) vouchers**, and almost half accept [Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program \(SNAP\)](#) benefits.

Outdoor markets can help shoppers avoid COVID infection. To serve their customers while meeting new guidelines for safety during the pandemic, CT farmers markets have innovated new programs and services, including pre-order systems, drive-thru operations, and special programs to serve vulnerable and food-insecure populations in Connecticut. [CitySeed](#), which operates five markets in New Haven, lets customers pre-order and have boxes



(Credit: Ellington Farmers Market)
Shoppers at the Ellington Farmers Market in Ellington, Connecticut.

“We're definitely the busiest we've ever been at this market. What COVID did was make people realize that it is important to shop local again.”

— Jon Scagnelli,
Durham Farmers Market Manager

of food placed directly into their car trunks. In addition to their normal practice of doubling **SNAP** dollars at their markets, City Seed also matched **FMNP** and **SFMNP** vouchers throughout the season.

In Danbury, farmers' market staff created two grab-and-go monthly programs for seniors. The first allowed Danbury Senior Center members to get fresh food

monthly, either through CSA-style boxes of produce selected by vendors, or via \$10 vouchers that seniors could spend at the market. Another program collaborated with [Age Well Connecticut](#) to accept two \$3 **FMNP** coupons, or any monetary donation, in exchange for a box of fresh produce worth \$12.

Connecticut market managers also developed educational programming that

attracted customers while maintaining social distancing. The [Danbury Farmers' Market](#) worked with their local library to provide scavenger hunt activities throughout the market. In lieu of in-person storytime gatherings, the [Durham Farmers' Market](#) partnered with the Durham Public Library for a “Storywalk”, a walk-thru storybook with laminated pages dispersed throughout the market.

Some of these adaptations are likely to endure beyond the pandemic. Pre-orders help farmers estimate how much product to bring to the markets, limiting harvest labor and food waste, and letting shoppers pick up exactly what they want even if they cannot make it to the market early. Home deliveries offer a valuable way for disabled or homebound customers to still access the farmers' bounty. Online ordering has also set a valuable standard for farmer-consumer communication. For example, the [Ellington Farmers' Market](#) page now connects shoppers directly to farmers for pre-orders. “[We will continue] always giving the option to contact the vendor individually and the option to pre-order,” said Ellington Farmers Market Manager Dianne Trueb, “That's a good thing and it's easy - you just put it [a pre-order link] on your website and people can use it or not use it.”

EQUITY IN PANDEMIC AID FOR FARMERS AND FOOD BUSINESSES

Throughout the Northeast, organizations we spoke to with **Farm to Families Food Box** contracts (the component of **CFAP** that funded food boxes from farmers and distributors to local emergency food programs) expressed their excitement in being able to provide food to families in their communities while providing a market for local farmers. However, many reported losing their contracts in the third and fourth round of contract renewals—a trend mirrored by the loss of contracts serving smaller farms nationwide¹—or declined to reapply because the requirements were too onerous. Small scale producers have expressed a desire to bring the program back to its roots: connecting local farmers with new markets while supporting food insecure families with quality food.

Nationally, anecdotal evidence suggests the program proved difficult

not just for contracts serving local markets, but also for organizations serving Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC)² farmers. Similarly, Northeast farmers, including those profiled here, used **Paycheck Protection Program (PPP)** and/or **Economic Injury Disaster Loans (EIDL)** loans to maintain crucial staff or fund operating expenses through pandemic-related business hurdles. These programs were hard to access for many BIPOC businesses, in line with historic discrimination in banking and lending³. **PPP** was also criticized for funding large businesses, who exploited program loopholes by applying as franchises or conglomerates, taking funds from the smaller businesses it was designed specifically to assist⁴.

We are proud of NASDA for adopting its recent Diversity, Inclusion, and Racial Equity policy amendment,

which reaffirmed the organization’s belief that governments and policies should treat all populations equitably. In light of this commitment, we urge NEASDA members and other policymakers to consider the value small, sustainable, BIPOC, and other marginalized producers bring when designing and implementing future aid programs.

¹ Bitker, J. (2 October 2020). Federal funding, lifeline for Bay Area Farms, Redirected to big corporations. *San Francisco Chronicle*. Retrieved from: <https://www.sfchronicle.com/food/article/USDA-cuts-funding-for-local-farms-feeding-15614157.php>

² Wozniacka, G., (1 December 2020). Black Farmers Say They Were Dropped From USDA’s Food Box Program. *Civil Eats*. Retrieved from <https://civileats.com/2020/12/01/black-farmers-say-they-were-dropped-from-the-usdas-food-box-program/>

³ Flitter, E. (15 July 2020). Black Business Owners Had a Harder Time Getting Federal Aid, a Study Finds. *The New York Times*. Retrieved from: <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/15/business/paycheck-protection-program-bias.html>

⁴ Brown, H. C., Fu, J. (8 December 2020). Fast-food giants gobbled up \$1 billion in federal aid for small businesses. *The Counter*.

INNOVATING NEW SALES MODELS TO MEET NEW DEMANDS

For farmers Jeff Frank and Kristin Illick of [Liberty Gardens](#) in Coopersburg, PA, the pandemic forced them to rethink their already successful business as a wholesaler of salad greens and specialty vegetables to New York City restaurants. Once the pandemic hit, virtually every customer they had shut down overnight.

Within just two months, they pivoted their business to an entirely different sales model—selling direct to local consumers in their Lehigh Valley region of northeastern Pennsylvania.

They received operating loans through **PPP** and **EIDL**, which were critical in buying them time to adjust and create a new business model while staying afloat. Pennsylvania-based farmer support organization [Pasa Sustainable Agriculture](#) has developed an online marketplace to connect growers like Jeff and Kristin to buyers and processors

“Farmers in the Lehigh Valley have talked for years about cooperating more in transportation, marketing, and distribution. COVID has helped these networks develop”

— Jeff Frank, Farmer, Liberty Gardens

so each individual farm doesn’t need to duplicate efforts. This effort is supported by **Pennsylvania’s Agriculture Department’s PA Preferred marketing program**.

Concerned by reports that most of the **PPP** and **EIDL** funding, at least at first, was monopolized by large producers, Frank and Illick recommend that more be done at the state and federal level for small producers like them.

Grow Pittsburgh suggestions:

Reflecting on their experiences during the 2020 season, Grow Pittsburgh staff had several suggestions for ways state agencies could continue to provide help in this continuing crisis and in similar situations in the future:

- Support the creation of more fresh produce stores. Food apartheid areas with limited transportation options continue to limit what many residents can purchase safely.
- Provide grants and loans to help businesses and nonprofits expand their cold storage, which limits what produce and other foods can be kept and made available beyond market day.
- Provide more support, through grants or loans or incentives, for community, industrial and commercial kitchens, including cooperatives. With increasing amounts of produce and other fresh items being grown in urban centers, there is a growing need for investment in expanded value-added processing, to create jobs and training opportunities, and expand food inventories.
- Host additional rounds of urban agriculture grants to help organizations expand existing projects or rise to meet new needs.

“[When COVID hit], we knew we had to get more food to more people, especially in ‘food apartheid’ areas. The pandemic has been a stressful time for all involved and has brought an opportunity for Grow Pittsburgh to expand.”

—Denele Hughson,
Director of Production and Farm Education, Grow Pittsburgh



(Credit: Grow Pittsburgh)

Customers shop for fresh produce at Grow Pittsburgh’s Hanna Shiloh Farm Stand.

SHIFTING PRIORITIES TO ADDRESS FOOD DISPARITIES

When the pandemic hit Pittsburgh, PA, [Grow Pittsburgh](#) combined a **Paycheck Protection Program (PPP)** loan with grants from private sources to retain as many employees as possible as they experienced precipitous drops in sales, donations, and the volunteers they rely on.

Many residents in the cities where Grow Pittsburgh operates but also smaller urban and rural pockets throughout the northeast, live in food apartheid areas—that is, geographic areas, that for structural reasons, have little or no fresh local food—and the coronavirus only made things worse. With peo-

ple afraid to enter grocery stores and concerned about shortages, farm stands became more important than ever. Grow Pittsburgh opened a new farm store in Braddock, PA, and opened their regular farmers markets with new social distancing and other protective measures. They moved some of their vegetable seedling sales to online orders and direct deliveries. At one site, they saw seedling sales skyrocket from 100 orders per week to selling their entire inventory each market. They were happy to be able to meet their community’s heightened interest in fresh produce as well as the sense of security derived from planting one’s own garden for food.

COMBINING MANY TOOLS HELPS LOCAL FARMERS THRIVE

Before the pandemic, [Farm Fresh Rhode Island's](#) mobile market had exclusively connected wholesale buyers, including restaurants, schools, universities, hospitals, and grocers, to small and mid-sized farmers through an aggregated online order form, where farmers list their wares, set their own prices, and track their sales in real time. Once orders are placed, farmers bring their products to Farm Fresh for aggregation and delivery to customers on the food hub's delivery trucks.

On March 16, 2020, Farm Fresh invited Rhode Island residents in select cities to use Market Mobile to order local food for curbside pickup and home delivery. Thanks to this rapid pivot, farmers who relied on wholesale income via Market Mobile were able to make up almost all of the sales they lost when restaurants and institutions closed. Since March, Market Mobile has seen a 101.6% increase in sales for local farmers and food producers compared to the same timeframe last year. Residential delivery continues to provide a critical, local alternative to in-person shopping as the pandemic continues, and Market Mobile reached a whole new customer base to whom they will continue to offer local food delivery after the pandemic.

When Farm Fresh RI pivoted to residential sales, Market Mobile expanded payment options to include electronic benefits transfer (EBT) cards so that **Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP)** recipients could use their benefits when ordering products. As a recipient of a 2018 USDA **Food Insecurity Nutrition Incentive (FINI) grant (now known as GusNIP)**, Farm Fresh RI was also able to apply a dollar-for-dollar match on SNAP-qualifying purchases of fresh fruits and vegetables via Market Mobile. This doubling of benefits saved each SNAP customer an average of 40 percent on groceries through the summer months.

Rhode Island was one of the first states able to accept **P-EBT, or Pandemic EBT**, which allowed for extended benefits for households with children who qualified for free or reduced-price meals at schools closed in response to COVID-19. As unemployment levels and SNAP qualifying households continue to rise, Market Mobile's ability to accept EBT and P-EBT has been crucial.

Farm Fresh RI also received a **Farmers to Families Food Box (FFFB)** contract through the USDA. This contract allowed Market Mobile to pack over 13,000 boxes of produce and local milk, meat, and cheese for the Rhode Island Community Food Bank over the course of fourteen weeks. Farm Fresh RI's sourcing for the boxes was almost entirely from local farms, in contrast to many of the larger-scale organizations who received contracts nationwide. Unfortunately, updated program require-



(Credit: Ciana Meyers/Blue December Art)

Packing produce for the Farm Fresh RI Market Mobile.

ments did not meet the needs of Farm Fresh RI's program recipients, and they ended their contract in September. However, With the help of the RI Community Food Bank, they were able to access **CARES Act** funding to provide a purchasing credit directly to food banks, enabling them to purchase local food directly for their clients. This new model gives more autonomy to food banks and allows them to respond to their communities needs.

NORTHEAST REGION LEADS IN BOTH THREATS TO FARMLAND AND PROACTIVE POLICY RESPONSES

American Farmland Trust launched their **Farms Under Threat** initiative in 2016 to document the extent, diversity, location, and quality of agricultural land in the continental United States, as well as the threats to farmland from expanding commercial, industrial, and residential development. In 2020, they published new data about state level threats and policy responses.

Between 2001 and 2016, over 800,000 acres of agricultural land were converted to urban or low-density residential land use throughout the Northeast region (see table at right). While Northeast states score highly for threats to development, our region also leads in policy responses. AFT identifies **state purchase of agricultural conservation easement (PACE)** programs as a key intervention states can take to slow the loss of farmland. Delaware and Pennsylvania tie **PACE** eligibility to enrollment in **agricultural districts**, which helps ensure contiguous tracts of agricultural land can be protected as a whole. New Jersey and Connecticut's **Farm Link programs** showcase **PACE** protected properties to help ensure that protected land stays in agricultural use. And along with mid-atlantic neighbor Maryland, AFT notes that the five top states for **PACE** acquisitions are all in the Northeast region (Delaware, New Jersey, Vermont, and Pennsylvania). Together, these five states have permanently protected more than one million acres of farmland.

Threatened Farmland in Northeast States

State	AFT Threat Score ⁶	Acres converted to UHD ⁷	% converted to UHD	Acres converted to LHD ⁸	% converted to LHD	Acres converted combined to UHD and LHD	Total %
NJ	94	32,000	3.9	39,000	5.6	71,000	8.7
RI	65	2,000	3.7	1,000	2.3	4,000	5.8
CT	65	9,000	2.5	14,000	4.4	23,000	6.4
MA	56	14,000	2.7	13,000	2.7	27,000	5.2
DE	56	10,000	1.9	21,000	4.3	32,000	5.8
PA	55	103,000	1.1	244,000	3.0	347,000	3.8
NY	37	56,000	0.6	197,000	2.4	254,000	2.7
NH	27	5,000	1.1	7,000	1.7	12,000	2.7
ME	14	3,000	0.3	14,000	1.4	18,000	1.6
VT	14	4,000	0.3	18,000	1.4	21,000	1.6

⁵ Freegood, J., Hunter, M., Dempsey, J., Sorensen, A. (2020). Farms Under Threat: The State of the States. American Farmland Trust. Retrieved from: http://s30428.pcdn.co/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2020/09/AFT_FUT_StateoftheStates_rev.pdf

⁶ AFT calculated threat scores on a scale from 1 to 100 by combining the total acres and percent of agricultural land converted, with 100 indicating the highest threat. Conversion to LDR received half the weight of conversion to UHD because some agricultural land remains in LDR areas

⁷ URBAN AND HIGHLY DEVELOPED (UHD) LAND USE: Largely built-up areas where most of the land has been converted into commercial, industrial, or residential uses, though opportunities may exist for urban agriculture. It also includes parks, golf courses, and other developed open space. Typically, residential areas with less than one housing unit per one-to-two acres are not included in the NLCD developed classes. UHD areas are commonly found in and around cities and towns, but also may include distributed energy production (e.g. well pads or solar panels) and other rural industrial sites.

⁸ LOW-DENSITY RESIDENTIAL (LDR) LAND USE: LDR is a new land use class to identify agricultural lands in areas where the average housing density is above the level where agriculture is typically viable. It is the first nationwide attempt to examine and spatially identify the impact of large-lot residential development on the agricultural land base. LDR land use is concentrated in areas where development pressure is increasing, and developed and undeveloped land are interspersed, often on the edges of cities and towns

COMMUNITY GARDEN STEPS UP TO MEET NEW NEED FOR EMERGENCY FOOD



(Credit: Christian Willauer)

Rodney Reservoir Garden in Wilmington, Delaware.

The [Rodney Reservoir Community Garden](#) is the largest community garden in Wilmington, Delaware, with more than 6,100 square feet of growing space. After an **urban agriculture mini-grant** from the **New Castle Conservation District** allowed the garden to repair its infrastructure, the garden was able to help meet its community's hunger needs by participating in the Harvest 2020 campaign, an effort organized by the Pennsylvania Horticultural Society to encourage individuals to grow their own food and donate a portion to combat increasing hunger and food security.

In early July, the [Delaware Center for Horticulture \(DCH\)](#) and the Food Bank of Delaware adopted the campaign to engage every county in Delaware. The [DCH](#) organized out-

reach, promotion, and donation tracking, while the [Food Bank of Delaware](#) supported collection and distribution efforts by working with the food pantries who received donations.

Rodney Reservoir Garden volunteers collected the garden's extra produce and donated it to St. Stephen's Lutheran Church's food pantry just four city-blocks away. Donations included leafy greens, tomatoes, cucumbers, squash, potatoes, and herbs. This neighbor-to-neighbor food work adds up; according to the official [Harvest 2020 dashboard](#), 34,531 pounds of fresh produce have been donated by some 10,471 registered gardeners located across the Delaware Valley. Often overlooked by state and federal agriculture policies, urban farms and gardens can thrive with investment from state and local governments.

FARMERS AND POLICYMAKERS WORK TOGETHER TO COMBAT CLIMATE CHANGE

For Melissa Law, one of four farmers at [Bumblersoot Farm](#) in Windham, Maine, climate change is deeply personal, as she has been forced to adapt to more erratic weather patterns and more severe storms in the six years she and her partners have owned their farm. Bumblersoot has endured drought and hail storms, high winds and intense rain events. Because of this, Melissa clearly sees the need for more state and federal action to help farm businesses weather the impacts of climate change and incentivize farmers to use practices that mitigate the impacts for the broader community.

This understanding led Melissa to become the farmer representative on the **Maine Climate Council (MCC)** – a group of diverse stakeholders tasked with establishing strategies to help the state meet its greenhouse gas reduction targets and ensure the resiliency of communities, industries, and people across the state. Melissa and Ellen Griswold, [Maine Farmland Trust's](#) Policy and Research Director, are part of the **Natural and Working Lands Working Group (NWLWG)**, a MCC working group charged with developing recommendations related to agriculture, forestry, and natural lands. Amanda Beal, Commissioner of the Maine Department of Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry, is a member of the **MCC** and one of the **NWLWG** Co-Chairs.

By participating in the **MCC** and the **NWLWG**, Melissa is helping to create bold policies that set new standards for climate action in Maine and the northeast region. From her experience as a farmer, Melissa has three recommendations to state governments seeking to support climate-smart farming.

The Maine Climate Council released “Maine Won’t Wait: A Four-Year Plan for Climate Action” on Dec. 1st.



(Credit: Matthew Whalen)

Melissa Law, Ben Whalen, and baby at Bumblersoot Farm in Windham, Maine.

Melissa Law's suggestions for combating climate change:

- First, it is imperative that we protect natural and working lands, especially those under pressure from development. This recommendation recognizes the capacity of our forested, agricultural and conserved lands to sequester vast amounts of carbon, as well as the significant role these lands play in [Northeast state] economies. Protecting farmland ensures that our communities have local food producers in their midst, which strengthens our local and regional food systems and reduces dependence on food produced thousands of miles away.
- Second, providing financial incentives will be critical to the widespread adoption of climate-friendly practices among land owners, farmers, and foresters. Incentives will encourage these parties to act with urgency, and will alleviate some of the risk inherent in investing in a new way of doing things. It is worth re-examining incentives that already exist in order to incorporate natural climate solutions into established frameworks.
- Finally, providing increased technical assistance is an important part of educating farmers about the benefits of implementing natural climate solutions. Service providers are adept at connecting farmers to the science, technology and tools that aid in the adoption of best climate practices. These strategies are critical to building resilience on farms and in our local communities as we face the dire threats of climate changenew needs.

RAPID RESPONSE BUSINESS ASSISTANCE HELPS FIT THE PIECES TOGETHER



(Credit: Caleb Kenna)

Ouellette, Pope, and Foster families of fourth generation dairy, Iroquois Acres in Bridport, VT.

When the pandemic hit, the [Vermont Housing and Conservation Board](#) (VHCB) shifted the long-term business and succession planning services normally provided through its Vermont Farm & Forest Viability Program to emergency business assistance and rapid response coaching, a mobilization they first modeled after Hurricane Irene in 2011. A key part of VHCB's work since late March has been helping businesses pivot to new sales channels and to apply for COVID relief, including **PPP**, **EIDL**, **Pandemic Unemployment Assistance (PUA)**, and state relief programs.

To assist agricultural businesses,

VHCB was able to leverage existing funds as well as receiving support from the **Vermont Working Lands Enterprise Board and CARES Act Coronavirus Relief Funds**. Vermont's State Legislature appropriated over \$34 million in CARES Act Coronavirus Relief Funds for the **Vermont COVID-19 Agriculture Assistance Program (VCAAP)** to "stabilize agricultural businesses and organizations based on their lost revenues and expenses related to the COVID-19 public health emergency." **VCAAP** grants were awarded to eligible farmers, meat and poultry processors, commercial slaughterhouses, farmers' markets, value-added food product businesses, forest products businesses, producer associations, dairy

producers and processors, and farm to school programs run by schools and child care providers.

Agricultural agencies had to set up these new grant-making programs from scratch, leaving farmers scrambling to figure out how to access funds during their busy spring. VHCB's Viability Program acted as a clearinghouse for producers to determine which programs they were eligible for and receive technical assistance with their applications. Sixty percent of the 500+ businesses they assisted were dairy farmers, followed by forest and wood products (10%), value-added processing businesses (6%), produce operations (5%), and slaughter/meat processing enterprises (3%).

"The investments we've been making for decades to build our local and regional food systems showed up this year. They paid off in how rapidly our farm and food system was able to pivot and support local communities in their immediate needs for food access, from doubling and tripling demand on the charitable food system to new retail pathways. We had this incredible ability to respond because of the variety of production, the creativity of our agricultural and food entrepreneurs, and the local and regional infrastructure that we've supported and that entrepreneurs have been taking the risks to build."

— Ela Chapin, Director of Vermont Farm and Food Viability Program, Vermont Housing and Conservation Board

"About half of the dairy farmers that applied for grant funds needed help filling out the application, understanding their milk check and where to find the financial information," explains Ela Chapin, Director of the Viability Program. "Many of them didn't have adequate online access, or the skills to navigate the systems required to apply electronically. Both our Agency of Agriculture and our Viability business advisors are working double time helping agricultural entrepreneurs access federal relief funds in a rapid way."

VHCB also helped farms to rapidly

change their business models; many food sector businesses saw increased demand, but from completely different types of customers. VHCB helped farmers think through online systems for sale, how to pivot to having local customers, and how to rethink their packaging. Many farms set up or expanded existing farm stores to meet the new demand for local products.

Thanks to their support, farms like Iroquois Acres in Bridport, VT, were able to receive assistance to help keep their businesses afloat. Experiencing significant, unanticipated price declines and

a quota on milk production, this fourth generation dairy was in the extremely challenging position of not being able to cover production costs. The Viability Program matched the farm owners with a business advisor who helped them navigate federal relief programs and analyze their finances to determine how to maintain operations in this extremely lean time. With timely guidance, and equipped with an adaptable budgeting tool, the family was able to make informed decisions about how to allocate resources and stabilized their business.

BOOSTING URBAN FARMERS THROUGH SHARED INFRASTRUCTURE

In Pennsylvania, Governor Tom Wolf's **PA Farm Bill** has six funnels to support investment in the state's agriculture. One funnel is support for urban agriculture, a strong presence in the state and throughout the northeast region. [Pennsylvania Horticultural Society](#) was able to bring the Philadelphia Tool Lending Library to fruition with a capital grant from the **Pennsylvania Department of Agriculture's Urban Agriculture Infrastructure Grants Program**. PHS collaborated with its local land trust partner, [Neighborhood Gardens Trust \(NGT\)](#), to place the tool library at Glenwood Green Acres, a preserved historic

community garden in North Philadelphia with ready access to mass transit, parking, and other amenities.

The library will feature two modified 8'x20' shipping containers connected by a pitched roof. It will use solar power to completely meet its own energy needs, allowing farmers to charge tools, conduct demonstrations, and host evening meetings. The library will house both large equipment and an assortment of the hand and power tools most needed by community gardens and production sites across Philadelphia, including brush hogs, flame weeders, wheelbarrows, and generators, as well as offering access

to "low-frequency" items that most gardens don't own themselves, such as public address systems, cider presses, tents, and more.

The library will be a benefit to the city's many farm and garden sites, a number of which are typically unable to access larger, more costly tools, as well as to public green spaces whose managers need access to many tools at once in order to host large volunteer workdays. Access to these tools will allow Philadelphia's farms and gardens to operate more efficiently and more effectively serve their communities with fresh produce and garden-based events.

SUPPORTING BEGINNING FARMERS AND THE AGRI-PRENEURIAL ECOSYSTEM THROUGH RESEARCH AND EDUCATION PROJECTS

The [New Entry Sustainable Farming Project](#) (New Entry) in Beverly, MA is a program of the Tufts University Friedman School of Nutrition, Science and Policy. Through courses, workshops, and hands-on trainings, access to land at their 15-acre incubator farm (USDA Certified Organic), and connections to markets through the New Entry Food Hub, New Entry offers a pathway for beginning, immigrant, and refugee farmers to get on the land and start their own operations. With support from **Northeast Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education (SARE)**, New Entry is conducting three training projects in collaboration with partners across the Northeast to support their farmers' needs.

Many beginning farmers get their start through apprenticeships, internships, or experiential learning programs on existing farms, and this hands-on training from other farmers can be key to their education. A 3-year **SARE Professional Development project** is providing [Farm Mentorship Training and Support Groups for Educators of Aspiring and Beginning Farmers](#). Professional development for farm mentors (covering topics such as communication, adult learning styles, providing feedback, balancing work and learning, generational difference) may result in more effective training for aspiring and beginning farmers, increase knowledge transfer of agricultural skills, increase employee retention, and improve farm work culture. Mentor trainings are being organized in Maryland, Maine, and New York. New Entry recently published a Mentor Training Toolkit - [Supporting Mentors to Teach Next Generation Agrarians](#) - to provide educators with resources, curricula, and strategies for effective mentorship.



(Credit: Tufts University)

A training at New Entry's Moraine Farm in Beverly, Massachusetts.

Another key challenge for beginning and established farmers alike is reliable farm labor. New England's growing number of diversified farmers urgently need new options for attracting, maintaining, and affording qualified farm labor. New Entry is leading a 3-year **SARE Novel Approaches** research project to develop [Creative Farm Business Models to Address Employee Hiring, Training, and Management Barriers](#). Partnering with area land-grant Universities, Farm Commons, and local producers, New Entry is organizing focus groups with farmers to inform business models that will help design agricultural labor solutions.

The social sustainability of US farmers, farm families, and farmworkers requires adaptation and resilience in the face of change and stress. A **3-year**

SARE Research and Education project led by University of Maine Cooperative Extension, Cornell Small Farms Program, and New Entry is focused on [Building Social Sustainability on Farms through Online and In-Person Education](#). This project focuses on testing the validity of three facets of social sustainability: 1) health and well-being; 2) equity; and 3) community connections. The team has conducted farmer focus groups across New England and New York and findings will inform educational curriculum development for a series of three farmer retreats and a comparable online learning platform. Together and independently, these three investigative projects have the potential to increase Northeast farmers' profitability, quality of life, and success in contributing to our regional food system.

BRINGING THE WHOLE COMMUNITY TO COMMUNITY SUPPORTED AGRICULTURE

In the Hudson Valley region of New York State, [Glynwood Center for Regional Food and Farming](#) was able to support accessibility for the farmers in its Hudson Valley CSA Coalition thanks to a **USDA Gus Schumacher Nutrition Incentive Program (GusNIP)**, formerly known as FINI) grant. The funds allowed them to pilot a "CSA is a SNAP" program to address the structural mismatch between Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) and the USDA's **Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP)**; CSA farmers rely on the cash they receive when members buy in at the start of the season, while SNAP participants receive benefits each month. The program uses **GusNIP** funding to capitalize a revolving loan fund. The fund allows the Coalition to pre-purchase and subsidize shares from CSA farms that the farms then sell to **SNAP** users at a 30% discount. The **SNAP** monies collected by the farms are then earmarked to be returned to the revolving fund at the end of the season.

"CSA is a SNAP" supported five farms in its pilot season, experimenting with two different distribution models to improve its accessibility. It also trained participating farmers in language justice, becoming **SNAP** retailers, and structural racism in the food system. In a challenging first year turned on its head by COVID-19, these farmers provided 40+ **SNAP** households with fresh produce at a time when people were showing more interest than ever in connecting with local farms.



(Credit: Megan Larmer)

Peekskill Mayor Andre Rainey and Jaslyn Mesa, Operations Coordinator at SunRiver Health, visit the "CSA is a SNAP" distribution farm stand.

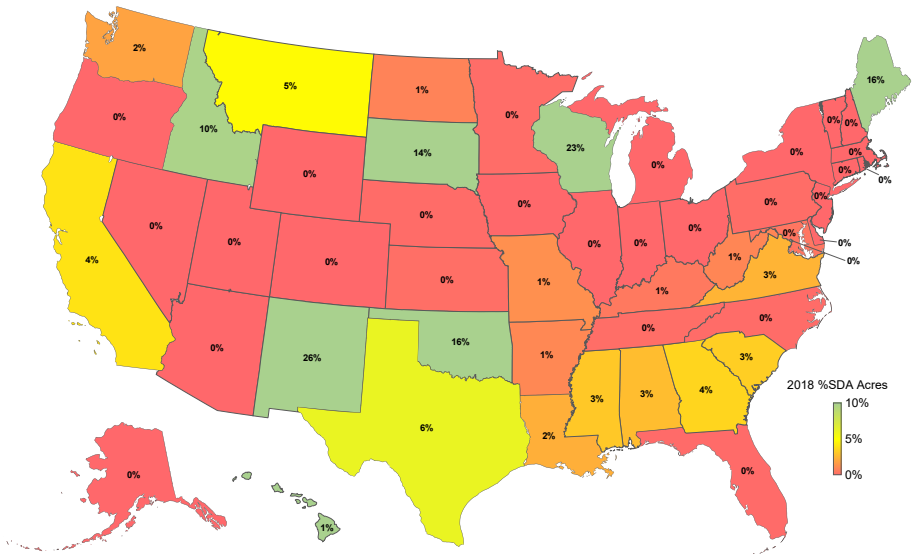
CONSERVATION PROGRAMS: SPOTLIGHT ON RACIAL EQUITY

Federal working lands conservation programs help make farms more viable, financially and environmentally. The **Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP)** and **Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP)** offer farmers critical financial resources for conservation projects that fight climate change, mitigate pollution, enhance habitat. However, compared to other regions of the country these programs are underutilized in the Northeast, especially by farmers of color (see map).

Because of a history of discrimination at USDA, many programs have funds set aside for farmers of color.* **CSP** and **EQIP** each have 5% of their funds reserved for farmers of color (in addition to another 5% for beginning farmers, and a few other set-aside pools). However, few Northeast states enroll enough farmers of color to fully utilize these funds. In 2018, the most recent year for which program data is currently available, fewer than 1.5% of **CSP** acres in the Northeast region were stewarded by farmers of color. Only four states in the region had any farmers of color using the program, and no state had more than two. For **EQIP**, almost 4.7% of program dollars in the 12-state Northeast region went to farmers of color, although in New England, farmers of color received less than 2.7% of **EQIP** dollars.

Conservation program funding can provide an essential

Percent of Total CSP Acres Enrolled by Socially Disadvantaged Producers in 2018



resource to help farmers of color succeed despite the barriers of systemic racism. Northeast states - and state departments of agriculture - can help to make sure conservation funding reaches farmers of color in the region using tools like culturally appropriate outreach, funding set-asides, and equity audits of existing practices.

* USDA uses the term "socially disadvantaged farmers and ranchers" to refer to African American, American Indian, Alaskan Native, Asian, Hispanic, and Pacific Islander farmers - here, the term "farmer of color" refers to the same groups.

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