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Vermont cultivating new crop: Farmers

By STEPHANIE M. PETERS

STAFF WRITER

What does it take for someone who's interesting in farming to get their business off the ground in Vermont?

Over its five-year lifetime, the Rutland Area Food and Farm Link has informally considered this question as it has helped young farmers establish relationships with their more experienced peers, directed retailers searching for local products to area growers, and sought out space for an incubator farm.

Last fall, however, to better quantify the interest in farming and associated needs, the organization put out a call to find out how many "new farmers" are out there, holding a packed mixer in downtown Rutland in November. More than half of those who turned out were faces unfamiliar to the group's staff, according to Executive Director Tara Kelly.

Her organization isn't the only one asking the question, however.

The Farm to Plate Initiative, an offshoot of the Vermont Sustainable Jobs Fund, has made the issue of "growing" new farmers one of the pillars of its research. The initiative was established after the passage during the last legislative session of Act 54, calling for the development of a 10-year plan for strengthening the state's farm and food system.

The organization began touring each of the state's counties in the fall, asking the agricultural community to weigh in on questions ranging from what resources new farmers need to what can be done to better promote and distribute locally grown foods.

A full report is due to the Legislature by July, but the group working on the project expects the research phase will continue through the spring, according to Ellen Kahler, the jobs fund's executive director. The final county food summit was scheduled for Friday in Brattleboro.

Needs emerge

Although the feedback the Farm to Plate Initiative has received is in its raw stages, and much of it is anecdotal or the product of brainstorming sessions, some clear needs of new farmers are emerging, according to Kit Perkins, Farm to Plate project coordinator.

Among them: access to land and equipment; capital that can be tapped without extensive credit or business plans, both of which take time to cultivate and which go hand-in-hand when approaching lenders; viability around the price growers can get for their products; and mentorship.

"Many people are getting into it with absolutely no farming background, instead making the choice out of a love for the outdoors, a love of growing, feeding people or being their own bosses," said Perkins, who has facilitated each of the roundtable sessions for new farmers. "There's a real soul connection to food, and to actually grow it is really satisfying for farmers."

According to Perkins, one of the first roadblocks is access to land. For instance, many of the available parcels are too large for someone just starting out to either manage or afford, which is where incubator farms like the Intervale Center in Burlington become valuable resources. Perkins is a former executive director there.

"Leases are OK, they can work really well, but again there's no equity being built," she said.

With incubators, growers who are looking to move on can sell their share and take that equity with them, she said.

Another arrangement growing in popularity is private landowners' leasing some of their acreage to aspiring farmers, Perkins said. Several agricultural groups in the state have taken to surveying private landowners to determine interest in those types of deals, she said.

Networks and money

At the new farmer roundtable at the Dec. 8 Addison County Food Summit in Middlebury, each of these issues was brought up by the eclectic group of educators, farmers, nonprofit employees and young people who are trying to crack the industry.

After nearly an hour of battling about their own experiences and desires, the two assets the group thought would be most critical to new farmers didn't focus directly on the land problem.

Galen Helms, a 20-year-old who has experienced four growing seasons as an apprentice at Last Resort Farm in Monkton, suggested the development of Farmbook.org, a farmer-centric Web site that he envisions will not only allow farmers to connect with each other, but assemble in one place a list of resources ranging from feed or fertilizer to financing.

"It's going to happen. It needs to happen," he said to the group.

The group also liked the idea of microloans or revolving lending for farming, noting that in that scenario "success breeds success."

Will Stevens, a state representative from Shoreham who owns and operates Golden Russet Farm with his wife, told the group he would speak to the legislative leadership about developing such a program.

Who they are

According to Kelly of the Rutland Area Food and Farm Link, farmers in Rutland County are expressing similar needs, for which the organization will continue to brainstorm ways to provide assistance.

Kelly said she and India Burnett Farmer, program director for the organization, were also encouraged by what they heard at the Rutland County Food Summit, which took place Nov. 12 at Green Mountain College.

The "questions they're asking and the information they're uncovering essentially confirms the work we've been doing," Kelly said.

So what does the landscape of new farmers in Rutland County look like?

About 35 people returned a survey from the November mixer asking them to categorize themselves and describe their needs. Of those, about half characterized themselves as new farmers, while the rest saw themselves as farm workers who hoped at some point to break out on their own.

The average length of time they'd been growing was three and a half years.

While a few were focusing on dairy, the majority considered themselves diversified

farmers producing a mix of vegetables, meat and fruit. Several expressed interest in exploring niche markets like grains, honey or fiber.

Most said they work another job in addition to farming, although a few described themselves as full-time farmers, according to Burnett Farmer.

Burnett Farmer described the mixer as "just the kickoff" of the effort the organization will direct to cultivating new farming businesses. Although planning is still under way, one small step the group took last month was to direct new farmers toward farm business planning classes being offered in Rutland this winter by University of Vermont Extension.

They're also looking forward to the unveiling of the Farm to Plate Initiative's recommendations to the Legislature, for which a statewide summit is expected in the fall, according to Kahler. She and Perkins encourage anyone wishing to comment on what's working and what's not in Vermont's farm and food system to contact them at farm2plate@vsjf.org.

"There's all this interest and all these people coming to local food, and they all get it from different perspectives," Kahler said. "But there are also an awful lot of folks who haven't (been exposed to local foods) yet."

stephanie.peters@rutlandherald.com
