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CULTIVATING HEALTHY COMMUNITIES

Farm Viability Program

Engaging Vermont's Farmers through Business Planning, Enterprise Analyses, Cash Flow and Dairy Management Teams

The University of Vermont (UVM) Extension Farm Viability Program keeps rural businesses active, diversifies Vermont agriculture and helps communities remain economically viable. The program assists farmers in developing successful whole-farm business plans which establish clear goals and objectives, and provide a strategy to achieve them in three to five years.

Qualified applicants work with Farm Business Management Educators to create vision and mission statements, identify and gather data on farm description, ownership structure, buildings and assets, farm labor and production practices. Initial financial information—which includes past years tax records, available balance sheets and income statements — are collected. Market description and assessment, alternative products, proposed construction projects needed and assistance in refining projected business ideas and strategies are included. Clients are able to make informed decisions about the future of the farm and the feasibility of proposed changes. Follow-up evaluation data collection includes information on implementation of the business plan. Since 2004, nearly 250 farm families have worked with Farm Viability staff. Over 100 business plans have been developed which keeps farm families and numerous employees actively contributing to Vermont's local food production.

The UVM Extension Farm Viability Program goes beyond business planning and enterprise analysis. In past years, numerous discussions were led by the Vermont Dairy Task Force to develop and implement Dairy Management Teams (DMT). The DMT program was designed to bring a facilitated, problem solving team approach to Vermont's dairy farmers. Farmers build their teams with trusted consultants from allied dairy industry professionals who have specific areas of expertise directly related to their team goals. Each farm DMT has a dedicated facilitator to schedule and manage meetings, record

meeting minutes and coordinate the flow of information from team members back to the farmer. UVM Extension has dedicated 66% of a full-time program staff position to coordinate 10 to 17 volunteer facilitators working with twenty two farms since 2008.

Last year, challenges facing Vermont farmers were enormous — from rising fuel, feed and fertilizer costs, to depressed markets and months of low milk prices — and 52 dairy farms in Vermont went out of business. The need for assistance was so great that UVM Extension launched a new program in 2009 called *Crunching Your Farm Numbers* to help farmers manage their cash flow in order to pay bills and make debt payments. During that time we fielded calls from dairy farmers through our toll-free helplines and assisted over 200 dairy farm families through on-farm visits and consultations.

The UVM Extension Farm Viability Program is funded by an innovative collaboration among the Vermont Housing and Conservation Board and the Vermont Agency of Agriculture and a grant from the United States Department of Agriculture's Natural Resource Conservation Service. UVM Extension leverages each dollar with three from other grants, donor and base dollars. Public support of local agriculture, as well as support from the Vermont legislature combined with federal, state and private grant initiatives are critical to maintaining a sustainable agricultural landscape in Vermont.

For more information, contact:

UVM Extension Farm Viability Program
Attention: Todd Stewart
19 Roosevelt Highway, Suite 305
Colchester, VT 05446
866-622-2990
Todd.Stewart@uvm.edu

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