



THE WORKING LANDS ENTERPRISE INITIATIVE: SUPPORTING VERMONT'S WORKING LANDSCAPE

Our First Ten Years
2012-2022

 **VERMONT**
WORKING LANDS ENTERPRISE INITIATIVE



“The Working Lands Enterprise Initiative grows our **economy** while keeping our land in active production. These **investments** keep our land working which is great for Vermont’s rural economy.”

– Anson Tebbetts

Secretary, Vermont Agency of Agriculture, Food, and Markets

ABOUT THE WORKING LANDS ENTERPRISE INITIATIVE (WLEI)

It is deeply satisfying to look back over the first ten years of WLEI. In only ten years WLEI has directly invested \$13.6 million in 418 farm, food, and forestry enterprises and leveraged an additional \$22.5M in matching funds.

In 2012, the Vermont Legislature and Governor Douglas created The Working Lands Enterprise Fund (WLEF), which was tasked with investing in Vermont’s working lands enterprises to strengthen our economy, advance job creation, sustain our environment, and keep Vermont beautiful. The Working Lands Enterprise Board (WLEB) was tasked with administering the program and is made up of 20 members throughout the supply chains of agriculture and forestry, and staff from the Vermont Agency of Agriculture, Vermont Department of Forests, Parks & Recreation, Vermont Agency of Commerce and Community Development, Vermont Housing & Conservation Board, Vermont Economic Development Authority, and Vermont Sustainable Jobs Fund.

A LETTER FROM

The Coordinating Committee of the Working Lands Enterprise Board

“Vermont’s unique agricultural and forest assets—its working landscape—are crucial to the state’s economy, communities, character, and culture. These assets provide jobs, food and fiber, energy, security, tourism and recreational opportunities, and a sense of well-being. They contribute to Vermont’s reputation for quality, resilience, and self-reliance.” – Vermont Act 142 of 2012

Ten years ago, Legislators passed Act 142—An Act Relating to Preserving Vermont’s Working Landscape—to significantly increase the state’s moral and financial support of the entrepreneurs who produce the food we eat and the various wood products we use every day, and who help keep Vermont’s fields and forests healthy, sustainable and resilient in the face of climate change. This working landscape draws thousands of visitors to our state each year and provides innumerable health and recreational benefits to all who call Vermont home. It is the heart of our rural economy and communities.

Since its inception, the 20 members of the Working Lands Enterprise Board have made meaningful and strategic investments that have supported business innovation, expansion, and market access for working lands enterprises to reach consumers in both Vermont and beyond. And we’ve intentionally invested in business and technical assistance organizations who work directly with these businesses to improve their viability, profitability, and ability to transition to the next generation. Utilizing strategic planning documents, research, and stakeholder input as a guide, such as the Farm to Plate Strategic Plan (2011–2020) and the Forest Sector Analysis (2016), the Board has made wise investments in existing and new infrastructure, business models, distribution channels, and product supply chains.

These investments have demonstrated results. Over **500 new jobs** have been created. At least **24,000 acres** of our working landscape have directly benefited from these investments, and businesses can attribute over **\$55 million** in annual sales because of their grant-supported projects. Additionally, for every \$1 in grant funds made by the Working Lands Enterprise Board, another \$1.6 in matching funds has been leveraged.

And it’s not just the grant dollars allocated or the business assistance delivered that has made a difference. It’s also the thoughtful, skillful, and consistent way in which Agency staff (Agency of Agriculture, Agency of Commerce, and Department of Forests, Parks and Recreation) and Board members manage the program that makes it so successful. Once the Board determines the strategic funding opportunities that will be offered, Agency staff hold webinars, create toolkits, and field phone calls to ensure the grant application process is accessible and easy to navigate. The staff make an extra effort to connect interested applicants to business assistance and offer individualized constructive feedback for unsuccessful applicants. Board members and the staff conduct site visits to grantee projects and require that Results Based Accountability style metrics be tracked and reported to demonstrate the benefits these funds have on our communities and economy.

The need for the Working Lands Enterprise Initiative is still great—and growing. Each cycle we see the request for public support outpacing the available funding by 4 to 5 times. For instance, the 2022 Working Lands grants and contracts cycle received 181 applications requesting over \$10.8 million in funding and the program was only able to make 86 awards totaling \$5.3 million.

The working lands economy is foundational to the story of Vermont, from its inception through today. As you will see in this report, it’s not just about the numbers—it’s the stories of what these grant dollars have made possible to individuals, families, businesses, and communities that speak to the heart of the work.

Legislators in 2012 had the foresight to understand why a program like the Working Lands Enterprise Fund needed to be created. Since that time, \$13.6 million in grants and contracts has been allocated to 418 working lands businesses and service provider organizations who directly support those businesses. WLEI has been an essential resource for many of Vermont’s working lands businesses and moving forward WLEI will be a critical resource as Vermont responds to challenges such as climate change, food insecurity, and global market pressures. We are grateful for the Legislature’s and the Scott Administration’s continued support of this important program. We know more great results will continue as a result of your support.

ALYSON EASTMAN – WLEB Chair - (Deputy Secretary, designee for the Vermont Agency of Agriculture, Food & Markets) | CHARLIE HANCOCK – WLEB Vice Chair - (North Woods Forestry) | PAUL FREDERICK (Forestry Division Program Manager, designee for the Vermont Department of Forests, Parks & Recreation) | TAYT BROOKS (Deputy Secretary, designee for the Vermont Agency of Commerce & Community Development) | ELLEN KAHLER (Executive Director, Vermont Sustainable Jobs Fund) | GUS SEELIG (Executive Director, Vermont Housing and Conservation Board) | SARAH ISHAM (Director of Agricultural Lending, designee for the Vermont Economic Development Authority)

Cumulative Program Impact to Date 2012-2022

Funded	Benefitted	Distributed	Leveraged
418	14	\$13.6M	\$22.5M
working lands businesses and technical assistance organizations	counties	in Working Lands funds	in matching funds

WLEI STRATEGICALLY INVESTS IN BUSINESSES AND SERVICE PROVIDER ORGANIZATIONS

Business Grants: We make strategic investments in working lands businesses that are poised for growth, can influence their value chain, spur innovation, create jobs, boost sales, increase production, and preserve or increase working lands acreage.

Service Provider Grants and Contracts: We invest in business and technical assistance service providers who work directly with working lands enterprises to support them as they grow, pivot, and adapt to an ever-changing marketplace, or prepare for new capital investment or an intergenerational transfer.

Producer Association Grants: We invest in the organizational development of VT-based producer associations supporting their members with technical assistance, marketing, research, and development.

Trade Show Assistance Grants: We invest in agriculture and forestry businesses' marketing and promoting their Vermont products at out-of-state trade shows.

Working Lands Grantees Have 2012-2020

Employed

1,118

people

Benefitted

24,007

acres

Created

539

new jobs

Generated over

\$55M

in sales*

*Based on two years of sales after grant completion

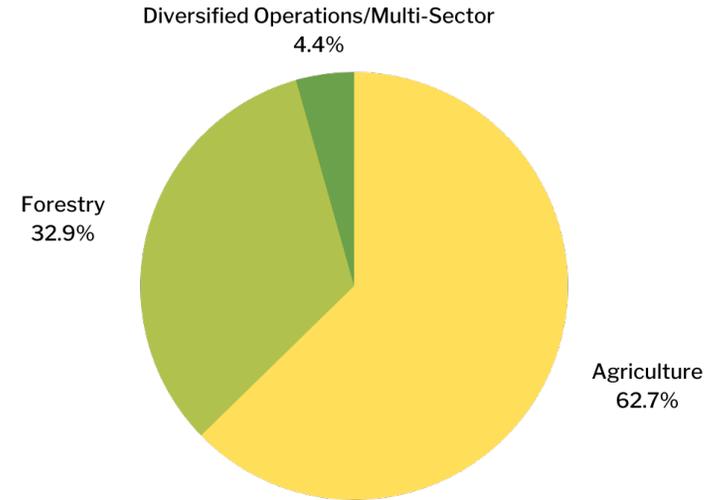


WHAT BUSINESS SECTORS RECIEVE WORKING LANDS GRANTS?

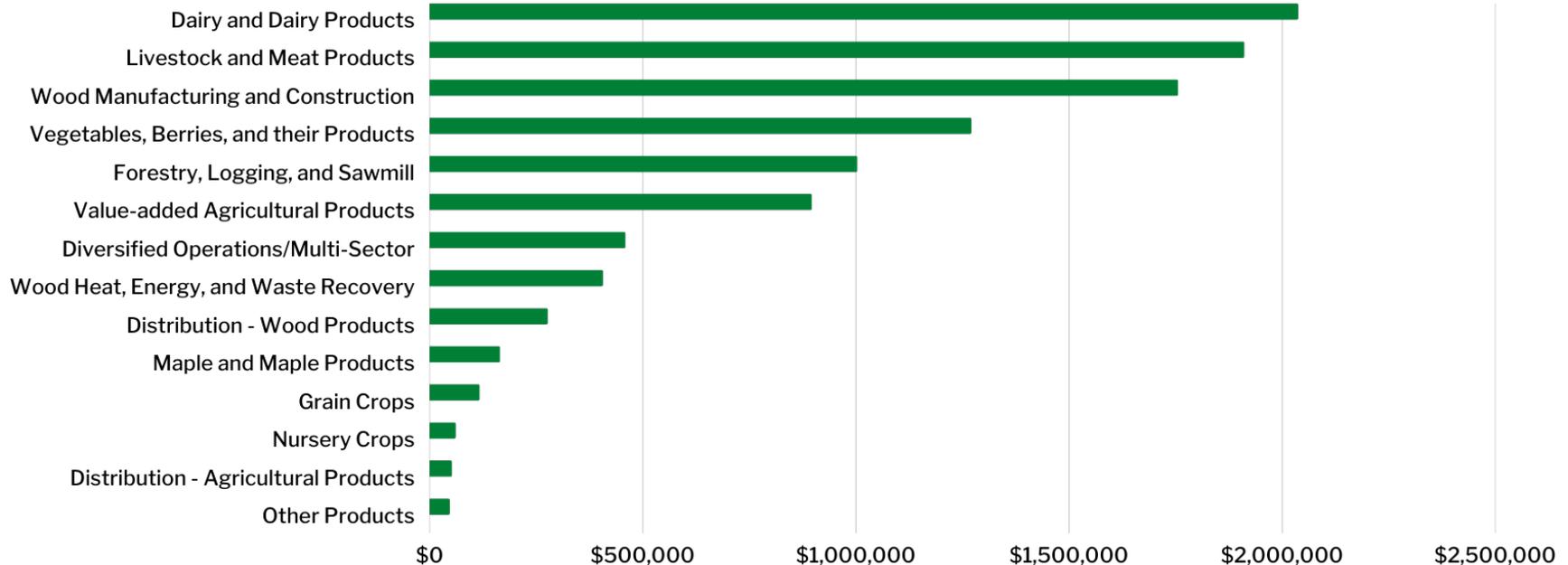
Working Lands business grants touch all sectors of Vermont’s working lands economies. WLEI and the governing board are committed to stimulating economic development in both the agricultural and forestry sectors of Vermont. From 2012 to 2022, The Working Lands Enterprise Fund has awarded over \$11 million dollars directly to working lands businesses.

To support strategic investments each year, the Working Lands Enterprise Board prioritizes a range of critical gaps and opportunities for maximum impact. In agriculture, dairy and meat products make up the bulk of investments. Produce operations and value-added agricultural products have also been key areas of grantmaking. Forestry makes up about a third of WLEI business grant investments to date, with wood manufacturing and construction businesses, using local wood, receiving the most investments. Primary forestry, logging, and sawmill operations also represent a critical sector of Vermont’s working lands economy and WLEI grant investments. In recent years, the Working Lands Enterprise Board has sought to increase funding specifically to forestry businesses, including those involved in wood heat and energy like pellet mills and firewood processors.

DISTRIBUTION OF GRANT FUNDS TO WORKING LANDS BUSINESSES, 2012–2022



DISTRIBUTION OF GRANT FUNDS TO BUSINESSES PER SECTOR, 2012–2022

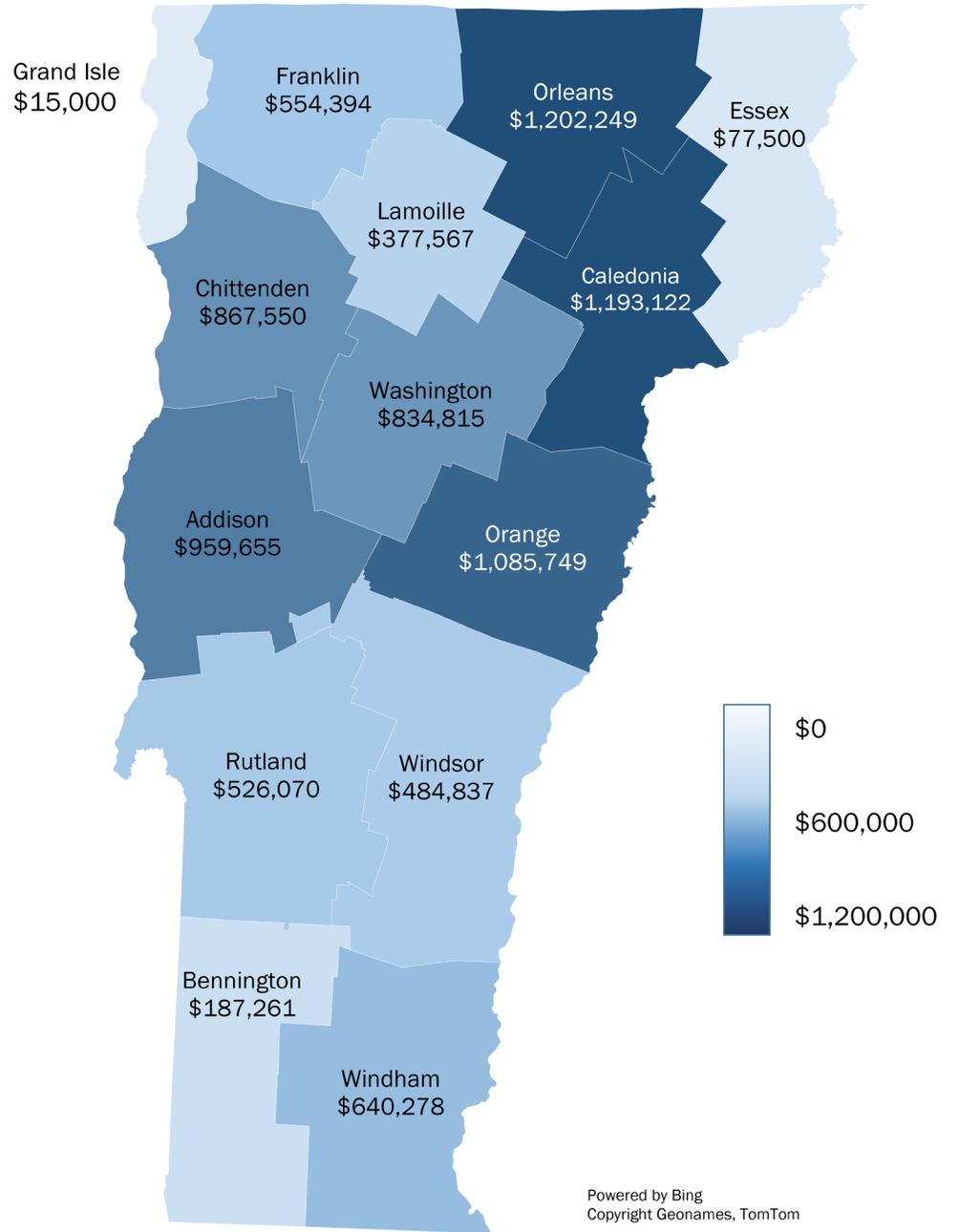


WHERE DO WORKING LANDS GRANTS GO?

Working Lands Enterprise Initiative business grantees hail from all corners of Vermont. Most investments from the past 10 years have gone to Orleans, Caledonia, and Orange Counties, with significant investments in Addison, Chittenden, and Washington. We are currently exploring collaborations aimed at increasing investments in Essex, Bennington, and Windham counties.



GRANT FUNDS TO BUSINESSES PER COUNTY, 2012-2022



FISCAL YEAR 2022 PROGRAM OVERVIEW

2022 brought historic grantmaking to the Working Lands Enterprise Initiative. Business, Service Provider, and Producer Association grants touched organizations in all corners of Vermont and represented many sectors of Vermont’s working landscape. In Fiscal Year 2022, special appropriations from the legislature increased WLEI’s grantmaking budget from the annual \$594,000 to an unprecedented \$5.3 million.

WLEI successfully used the special appropriations from the legislature to target bottlenecks in the local meat supply chain, which resulted in over \$1.1 million—a quarter of 2022 grant investments—supporting meat production and processing businesses.

The Working Lands Enterprise Board also leveraged the special appropriations to make transformational large-scale investments of up to \$250,000 for initiatives resulting in supply chain or market level impact on its respective sector.

These larger grants are supporting businesses in forestry and value-added agriculture whose projects create new opportunities for multiple other businesses in their respective supply chains.

As a result of these larger grants, the forestry sector received historic investments from WLEI to the tune of \$1.4 million to enhance the production and manufacturing of forest products. In fiscal year 2022, WLEI also prioritized funding for service provider organizations and service producer associations providing technical assistance and business assistance to agriculture and forest businesses.

Total funds requested

\$10,836,064

Matching funds leveraged in FY22:

\$11,281,381

Number of awards made

86

Total funds distributed

\$5,274,921

Number of applicants

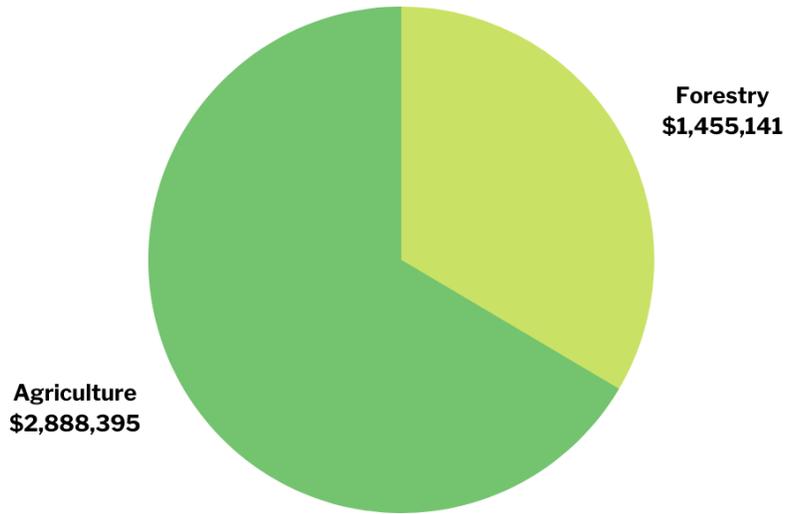
181

Counties benefitted

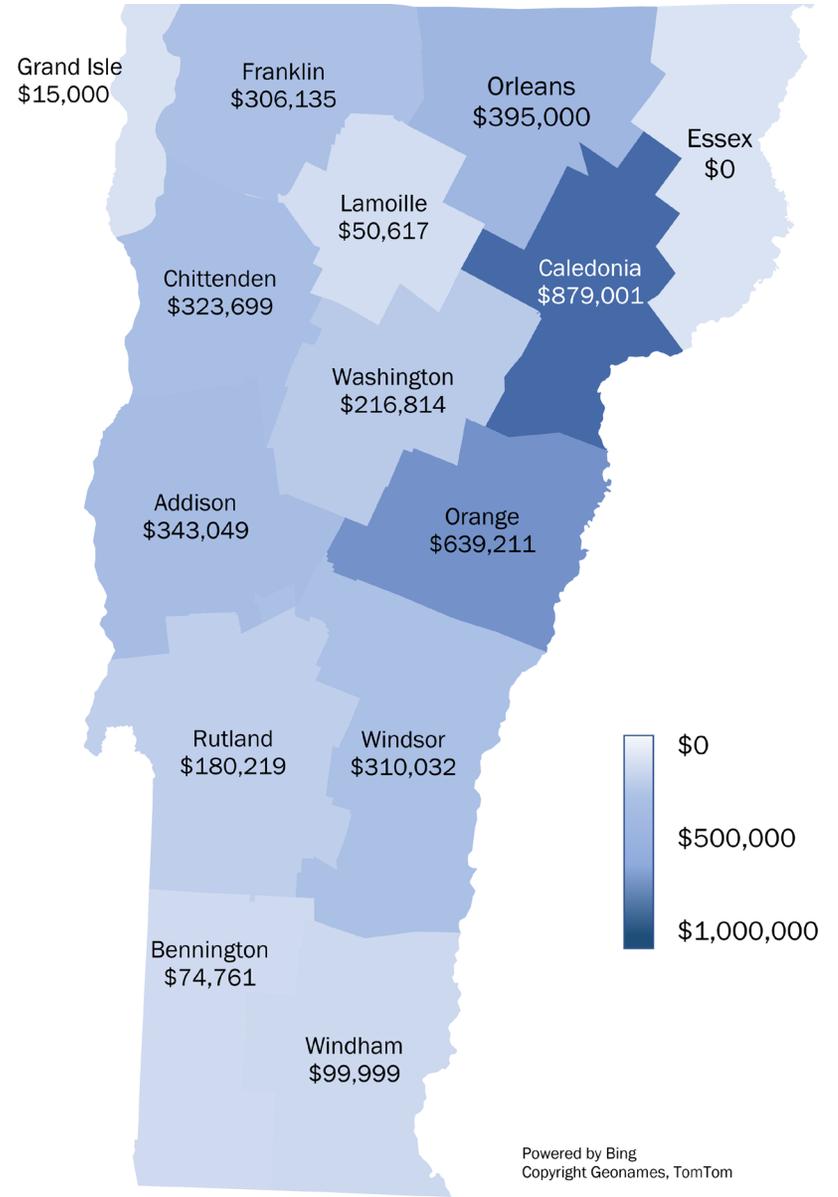
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FISCAL YEAR 2022 GRANT FUNDS TO BUSINESSES

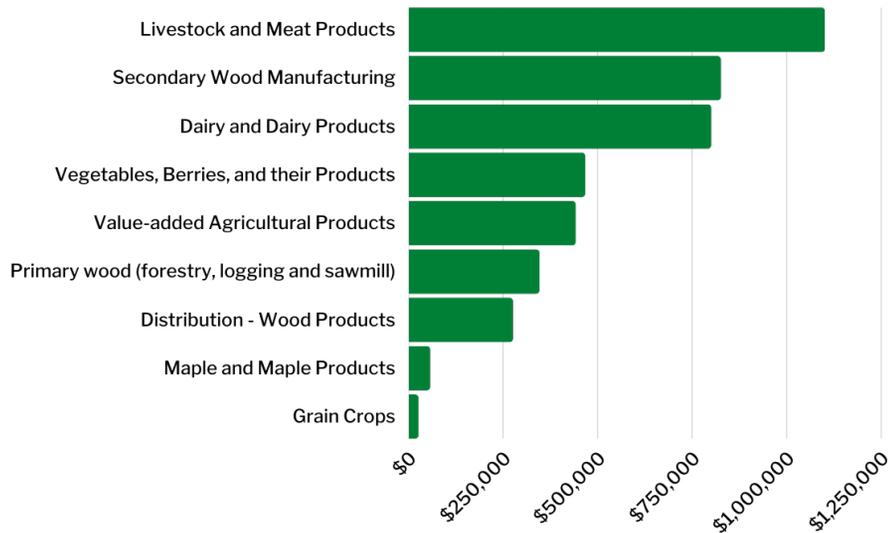
GRANT FUNDS TO AGRICULTURE AND FORESTRY BUSINESSES, FY 2022



GRANT FUNDS TO BUSINESSES BY COUNTY, FY 2022



SECTOR DISTRIBUTION OF GRANTS TO BUSINESSES, FY 2022



TRADE SHOW ASSISTANCE GRANTS

Part of the marketing and promotion strategy of the Working Lands Enterprise Board is to invest in Trade Show Assistance grants (TSAG), providing financial assistance to Vermont agriculture and forestry businesses to help them identify, plan, exhibit, and sell their Vermont products at out-of-state trade shows. These matching grants provide eligible trade show-related expenses to help businesses connect with wholesale buyers and expand into new markets. Funding includes marketing assets and booth design, registration fees (including booth space and educational sessions).



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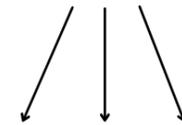
Number of Vermont business who have received TSAG grants since 2015

\$212,000

Total Working Lands Enterprise grants to date

42

Unique trade shows attended since 2015



6,213

Total leads generated at shows

\$4,193,568

Estimated value of potential revenue at shows

\$160,328

Value of sales placed at shows

2022 PRODUCER ASSOCIATION GRANTEES

In fiscal year 2022, WLEB introduced a new grant opportunity specifically for Vermont's producer associations. WLEB saw a need to support Vermont-based nonprofit producer association groups that represent and promote Vermont agriculture, food, beverage, forest, or fiber products. Grants of up to \$20,000 provided needed resources to support leadership and organizational development, governance, membership development, marketing and sales support, and business research and development.

2022 PRODUCER ASSOCIATION GRANTEES AND PROJECTS TOTALED \$183,604 TO THE FOLLOWING ORGANIZATIONS

- Connecticut River Watershed Alliance
- Franklin and Grand Isle Farmer's Watershed Alliance
- Northern Grain Growers Association
- Real Organic Project
- Vermont Farm Bureau
- Vermont Fresh Network
- Vermont Grass Farmers Association
- Vermont Organic Farmers
- Vermont Sheep and Goat Association
- Vermont Woodlands Association
- Vermont Cheese Council



2022 SERVICE PROVIDER GRANTEES

To support the success of working lands businesses, in FY22 the Working Lands Enterprise Board awarded \$72,000 to organizations that provide working lands businesses with technical and business assistance. This service provider strategy seeks to strengthen the executive business skills of working lands entrepreneurs, a need identified by lenders, funders, and business owners.

Their services allow farm, food, and forest-sector businesses focus on growing their business through advising and training. These service providers are production specialists, business advisors, marketing and branding firms, accountants, and management consultants.

2022 SERVICE PROVIDER GRANTEES AND PROJECTS TOTALED \$72,000 TO THE FOLLOWING ORGANIZATIONS

Addison County Relocalization Network, Inc. (ACORN) | Champlain Valley Food Hub Business Plan and Feasibility Study

Center for Women & Enterprise | Business Planning for Women-Owned Working Lands Businesses in Vermont

Vermont Grape and Wine Council | Create an American Viticultural Area (AVA) for the Champlain Valley of Vermont

Vermont Releaf Collective | Developing Culturally Relevant Technical Assistance for Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC)-Led Working Lands Enterprises



HAYSTACK FARMSTEAD

PROVIDING FOR PAWLET AND BEYOND

A seventh-generation dairy family in Pawlet has embraced the potential growth and adaptation possibilities that a Working Lands grant can enable. Brian and Brea Leach of Haystack Farmstead, a cattle grazing operation established in 2016, are working to tackle an ongoing challenge for many Vermont food producers: meat and poultry slaughter.

“We think there are many reasons why livestock farming is a valuable component of the Vermont working landscape,” said Brian Leach. “We secured Working Lands Enterprise Initiative funding for the construction of an engineered on-farm processing system to be operated as a small cooperative with our farm and two other local farmers.”

Leach believes entrepreneurial thinking with timely investments directed at this pressing need within the local food system will lead to success for their business, but also for their local farming community.

“With grant funding from Working Lands, we have an opportunity to build a viable processing system for our farm that secures our future here and takes meaningful steps to helping others do the same”

– Brian Leach, Haystack Farmstead

While Pawlet has a long history of commercial farming and forestry activity, according to Leach it still struggles with its agricultural identity. “If we can address some of our systemic problems, our grazing enterprise could be one of several in Pawlet alone, one of hundreds throughout the state,” said Leach. “We are working with other farmers in town to provide low-cost training and access to the grant-funded facility to address their shared viability concerns.”

Working Lands Enterprise funding has been vital to many of our Vermont agricultural and forestry businesses as they explore expansion, diversification, or functional improvements to their businesses. As the Leach’s at Haystack Farmstead recognize, Working Lands funding can address some of the missing economic components that will allow future business success.



“A livestock enterprise set-up on a single holding of a few hundred acres needs to realize the income from processing livestock to be viable. On our 350-acre farm, we can safely graze enough stock to generate 30 finished beef per year and carry a replacement herd through the winter. If everything is set up well the farm could net \$60k if we do the processing ourselves and market the product effectively. This is very close to a livable income, with some time for a handful of other diversified earning activities.”

Our Vermont agricultural communities and farmers have always dreamed of fulfilling work while feeding their families, friends, and communities. The heritage of a farming life in Vermont has always brought challenges, and the economic realities of the 21st century have only increased the pressures of maintaining and prospering for our working lands businesses.

“There was a time when farmers sent their kids to school in hopes that they would make a better life for themselves off the farm. What I’ve realized is that it doesn’t have to be that way,” Leach reflected.

“Everything I grapple with on the farm can be improved. There is a good system hiding in there, it just takes time and money to build it. I want this farm to be a peaceful, productive, and fun place to live and work.”

GRANT AWARD: \$95,259

PROJECT: BUILDING A MODULAR ON-FARM MEAT PLANT TO INCREASE FARM REVENUE

ACRES IMPACTED: 487

To watch a video of the Haystack Farmstead project, visit workinglands.vermont.gov/blog/haystack or scan the QR code.





GLOBAL VILLAGE FOODS

CREATING BOLD AFRICAN FLAVORS WITH VERMONT PRODUCTS

A common theme in the world today is “it takes a village.” An African proverb most closely attached to raising a child, it is no less meaningful here in Vermont when it comes to supporting our food system.

Global Village Foods of Quechee began when Mel and Damaris Hall settled here in Vermont from Tennessee and Kenya and were searching for traditional African food ingredients. They took to “sending off to Kenya for large bags of millet and scouring farmers markets to recreate the fresh, healthy, and delicious foods Damaris was used to in Kenya. From there we realized that many people were interested in eating better-for-you and better tasting foods,” Mel Hall remembered.

Once the idea of creating a business dedicated to supplying people with African-inspired meals and snacks took hold, the couple became determined to create Global Village Foods.

“This effort led to years of trial-and-error breakthroughs in home meals delivery, concessions, catering, food kiosks, a full-service restaurant and eventually success in ready-to-eat, allergy-friendly African food,” Hall said. “The basic idea is to share the culture of African hospitality through foods, with people all over the country via healthy, convenient meals full of bold African flavors and made to serve real dietary needs.”

Creating a sustainable community is what inspired Global Village Foods to apply for a Working Lands grant. “Our team seeks to maintain a quintessential Vermont ethos of local sourcing from friends and neighbors, of the simple vegetables and meats used in the recipes,” Hall said.

Hall also highlighted that these strong relationships can insulate the community from “the ups and downs of markets and corporate driven supply chains.”



The Halls believe the Working Lands grant will enable Global Village Foods to significantly increase their positive impact on local farmers. They hope that creating a village of “locally sourced produce in our allergy-friendly, strongly plant-based, global flavor inspired product offerings will help us secure a position of sustainable good growth as we seek to become the next major national Vermont specialty food brand.”

“Local sourcing means fresher and better tasting inputs from natural and organic producers whose good stewardship promotes healthier lands and stronger communities.”

– Mel Hall, Global Village Foods

The dream of becoming an important “Vermont brand” infuses the Halls’ hopes of “pioneering concepts around helping both our own local, as well as targeted underserved communities in other areas, in developing sustainable circular local economies around food, agriculture and doing-well-while-doing good business practices.

We hope to help make conversations and actions around equity and socially responsible business growth the expected norm and example to be emulated.”

GRANT AWARD: \$250,000

PROJECT: INCREASING VOLUME OF VERMONT SOURCED PRODUCTS IN THEIR READY-TO-EAT MEALS

JOBS CREATED: 8

To watch a video highlight of Global Village Foods, visit workinglands.vermont.gov/blog/globalvillagefoods or scan the QR code.





THE TREE HOUSE HARDWOODS MEETING DEMAND FOR VERMONT MAPLE COUNTERTOPS

When The Tree House Hardwoods opened its doors in South Burlington, Vermont, in 2014, the mission was to keep it simple and sell lumber with basic services like planing boards.

Nearly a decade later, the operation has expanded three times to accommodate complex wood projects, like ornate replica column bases for historical buildings and custom molding. Most of their growth, though, comes from the increasing demand for butcher block countertops made from Vermont maple.

“We have more demand than we have production capacity. We just can’t produce butcher blocks as fast as people want to buy them no matter how much we do,” said Adam Claussen, who works in the mill shop.

Owner Lucas Jenson says they’ve found their audience among buyers who understand the value of integrating wood into their homes.

“There is a butcher block mentality or butcher block state of mind,” Jenson explained. “Some people are totally fine with a Corian or a laminated countertop. People interested in a butcher block countertop ... there’s something about the quality of the environment they’ve chosen to live in.”

One thing is immediately evident upon seeing the quality of craftsmanship and passion the Tree House team brings to their work: wood is their art form, and it’s anything but simple. Their signature Vermont Butcherblock Company countertops are made in a multi-step process that normally takes eight to ten weeks to deliver after a customer orders.

It’s a process they say will soon be cut to only two to three weeks as part of their most recent facility upgrade, made possible by a \$75,000 Working Lands Enterprise Initiative (WLEI) grant.



“This equipment has been transformative. It has transformed this shop more than anything else we’ve ever done since we started,” Jenson said. In the fall of 2022, three new pieces of equipment were purchased with the grant funds, and the workshop space was expanded to create room.

Within just a few months of the upgrade, the team saw a fifty percent reduction in the time it takes to produce a butcherblock countertop. The impact is evident in every area of the business, including their retail store, where butcher blocks can be purchased off the shelf for the first time.

“This equipment has allowed us to leap forward from a wood shop into more of a manufacturing and production facility. We still do customized work, but this allows us to have butcher blocks in stock and not have every single one be a special order.”

– Jeremy Ravelin, Tree House Hardwoods

Their new gang rip saw cuts a board into multiple butcherblock strips with one pass rather than three to four passes. “It’s easily seven or eight times faster than the way we were doing it before. This week, we ran about 3,000 board feet of maple into strips in three hours. Before, it would have taken us three or four days,” Claussen said of the process.

GRANT AWARD: \$75,000

PROJECT: PURCHASING EQUIPMENT TO INCREASE BUTCHER BLOCK PRODUCTION 7X

JOBS CREATED: 8

Read the full story at
workinglands.vermont.gov/blog/treehousehardwoods
or scan the QR code.





HILLSIDE HOMESTEAD

INCREASING MILK PROFITABILITY FOR RAW CHEESE MILK PRODUCTION

In 2019, Chet and Renee Baker of Albany, Vermont, realized their dream of buying their own farm. “We started from zero. It took us a year to get the loan to buy the place. We were two young people with zero equity other than our cattle,” Renee said. Hillside Homestead, their 65-cow dairy farm, is their pride and joy. “I couldn’t imagine a better way to live my life,” Renee, who grew up on a dairy farm, said.

Yet, the husband-and-wife team is barely hanging on. The farm is often paid below the cost of production due to a national oversupply of milk. “We are holding on to our pants. It’s milk check to milk check for us,” Baker said.

At the end of 2022, the Bakers received approximately \$17.50 for every hundred pounds of milk (cwt.) they shipped to Dairy Farmers of America,

well below their cost of production of \$26.13 cwt. As they looked at ways to become more profitable, they began talking with The Cellars at Jasper Hill Farm, a world-renowned maker of artisan cheeses located only 20 minutes away.

As Jasper Hill has grown, so has the demand for Vermont-sourced milk for cheeses made from raw and pasteurized milk. Jasper Hill operates a pasteurized-milk creamery at the Vermont Food Venture Center in Hardwick and a raw milk creamery at Jasper Hill Creamery in Greensboro.

In 2021, the Bakers began shipping about a quarter of their milk to the creamery at the Food Venture Center. This allowed them to receive up to \$30 cwt. for pasteurized milk, as designated by Jasper Hill.

The Bakers can become even more profitable if they provide raw milk to Jasper Hill. Though Renee says the cost to make milk for raw milk cheese is higher, in the \$30 cwt. range, Jasper Hill will take that into account and pay them a higher premium price.

In the raw milk model, cows must eat dry hay rather than fermented feed. In addition, farmers must eliminate the risks of listeria. One common



source is sawdust, used for bedding for cows. “Listeria grows anywhere it is damp,” Renee said. “Dry sawdust is crucial, and we have no place to store sawdust right now.”

“[Providing raw milk to Jasper Hill] will allow us to market our milk at a price significantly higher than anyone else we can ship to.”

– Renee Baker, Hillside Homestead

To support their shift to producing milk for raw milk cheese, the Bakers received a \$70,000 grant from the Working Lands Enterprise Initiative in 2022 to build a storage shed for their sawdust and dry hay. Without a grant like this, we would have no options,” Renee said.

The Bakers plan to complete the 40-foot by 80-foot building in early 2023. Jasper Hill plans to increase milk purchases from the Bakers, up to an estimated 75 percent of production, in 2023.

Jasper Hill Founder Mateo Kehler estimates they will need to take on seven new partner farms by 2031 to meet the demand for Jasper Hill’s

artisan cheese. The Bakers will be one of the first new partner farms that will support the shift from pasteurized-milk cheese to raw-milk cheese production.

“We’re building a value-added supply chain from the ground up. Hillside Homestead is a test case for bringing new farms on board and showing that this partnership can benefit us both,” Kehler said.

GRANT AWARD: \$70,000

PROJECT: \$80K INCREASE IN ANNUAL SALES DUE TO RAW MILK SALES FOR CHEESE

Read the full story at
workinglands.vermont.gov/blog/hillsidehomestead
or scan the QR code.





VERMONT LIVESTOCK SLAUGHTER AND PROCESSING

EXPANDING VERMONT'S MEAT PROCESSING CAPACITY

“Vermont Livestock Slaughter and Processing’s (VLSP) mission is to provide quality service in the food industry, and to strengthen and protect the reputation of high-quality products from Vermont that are regularly sought by consumers,” stated Carl Cushing, owner of the long-time business in Ferrisburgh.

“The reason why we do the work that we do extends beyond the walls of our facility—being able to help producers reach diverse markets contributes to their business’ viability and opportunity for growth.” With the Working Lands investment, they received in 2022, VLSP looks to increase their capacity to serve an industry shortfall in Vermont for slaughter and meat processing.

“The Working Lands grant is directly supporting our business by helping us upgrade our facility to have more efficient, sustainable, and reliable equipment,” Cushing said.

“Our small facility is a key link between working lands businesses that are growing our food and consumers. We hope to be an example of a small, local, and resilient business in the food system.”

– Carl Cushing, VLSP

“The equipment we have selected for our facility will not only improve the work environment but will also allow us to provide more value-added product options to the producers we work with. We will be able to produce value-added products that are neatly packaged and labeled for grocery stores; and the equipment will also help us provide the local school district with more locally grown, humanely raised, and antibiotic free ground beef patties for students’ lunches.”

Cushing hopes to set a new bar for what a small, local service provider can do for our local food system. “The COVID-19 pandemic forced many meat



processing facilities to close, leaving producers with nowhere to process their meat and creating a gap between producers and consumers. The pandemic highlighted flaws in the U.S.' meat system including our reliance on large, corporate processing facilities.”

VLSP is one of only eight USDA-inspected meat slaughter & processing businesses in Vermont. This type of facility is needed for any producer that would like to sell their product across state lines. With the Working Lands investment, VLSP hopes to grow its ability to adapt to the needs of Vermont’s food industry.

“In the near-term we are excited to recruit for new long-term employment opportunities while also retaining current employees. Demonstrated by the pandemic, there is a clear and pressing need for resilient, distributed food processing infrastructure in Vermont and throughout the United States,” said Cushing. “As a small facility in a safe, accessible location in a climate-resilient state, maintaining and increasing our services at VLSP will provide healthy food to Vermonters and our surrounding states in the face of emergencies while continuing to support the livelihoods of our customers.”

“When we all work together to strengthen our food system, our communities thrive,” Secretary Tebbetts said. “It’s apparent our friends at VLSP feel the same, and we thank them for their commitment to Vermont.”

GRANT AWARD: \$100,000

PROJECT: INCREASING WEEKLY THROUGHPUT 3X BY UPGRADING FACILITY

JOBS CREATED: 10

To watch a video highlight of VLSP, visit workinglands.vermont.gov/blog/vlsp or scan the QR code.





CENTER FOR AN AGRICULTURAL ECONOMY

SCALING UP TO SERVE VT FOOD AND FARM BUSINESSES

It's 4 p.m. on a Friday at the Farm Connex warehouse in Hardwick, Vermont. Two of their distribution vehicles are returning from delivering Vermont-made food products to stores and restaurants.

While out, they picked up freshly-made products directly from producers—everything from milk to craft sodas and salumi. At Farm Connex, the items will be unloaded, prepped, and reloaded for deliveries to stores the next day.

Farm Connex, the distribution arm of the Center for an Agricultural Economy's (CAE) Food Hub, delivers goods for Vermont producers whose operations are too small or rural to work with traditional distributors.

“If you think about Butterworks Organic or Strafford Organic and the volume of value-added dairy they need to move off the farm - that is not a task they can easily do themselves without having their own trucking fleet and employees. Rather than replicating that at every farm, we can do that for many different farmers.”

– Jon Ramsey, CAE

Yet the space where an estimated \$12 million of food was moved from farm to shelf in 2022 is only 1,200 square feet. While one truck unloads products in the warehouse, the second is forced to wait in the parking lot because there's only one loading bay. “It's like a Tetris game with pallets and boxes,” Corey Hennessey, Farm Connex general manager, said. “We handle things multiple times because of space limitations, which fundamentally increases our costs.”

Cramped in her makeshift office in the loft above the loading bay (which she shares with Dispatch and Logistics Coordinator Stella James and Ops



Manager Don Maynard), Hennessey says the lack of space in this middle part of the supply chain is a bottleneck preventing Farm Connex from serving more farmers.

Founded in 2009 by Maynard and transferred to CAE in 2020, Farm Connex has grown from serving about a dozen farms and food businesses when it began to nearly 100 today. Farms like Sweet Rowen Farmstead in West Glover have seen exponential growth because of the partnership.

“Don was going to Sweet Rowen with a van to load up ten milk crates each week, and now we’re picking up, on average, 250 to 300 a week,” Ramsay said.

Sweet Rowen’s story is one of many similar producer stories. In 2021, Farm Connex distributed products valued at \$8 million for producers. In 2022, that number rose over 50 percent to an expected \$12 million. In 2023, they expect to surpass that. Hennessey, an original employee in the company, says demand for their services has exceeded their capacity for as long as she can remember.

With a growing waitlist built on their reputation for scaling Vermont farm businesses to the next level, CAE received a \$249,360 grant in 2022 from the Working Lands Enterprise Initiative to scale their operation.

The grant will support building out infrastructure in a new warehouse, a new freight truck with one new trucking route with out-of-state delivery points, CDL driver training, and staff time for a general manager and dispatch and logistics coordinator.

GRANT AWARD: \$249,360

PROJECT: INCREASING DISTRIBUTION OF VT PRODUCTS

ACRES IMPACTED: BENEFITS 100 VT BUSINESSES
THAT STEWARD 10,000 ACRES

Read the full story at
workinglands.vermont.gov/blog/cae
or scan the QR code.





GEVRY FIREWOOD

SUPPORTING VERMONT'S FOREST ECONOMY

Firewood remains a vital element of rural living and our working lands economy.

Working the woods comes naturally to many Vermonters. Spending the day amongst the trees of Vermont attracts many to find an occupation that makes Vermont's hills and valley's their office. Ethan and Ashlie Gevry have done just that. "Here at Gevry Firewood we do what we do because we like being able to provide our local area with high quality firewood," said Ethan Gevry of Addison, Vermont. "We also do it to enrich the local economy, from supporting area loggers to buying our fuel and parts locally, while creating jobs in our community."

The Working Lands Enterprise Initiative supports entrepreneurs at the forefront of Vermont's Working Lands economy to help growing

businesses thrive. "The working lands grant is important because it allowed us to do things needed to grow our business at a much faster rate than we could do on our own," said Gevry.

"In 2022 we will have spent almost \$750,000 on logs, all of that is spent with Vermont loggers in our community and throughout the state. We also buy all our fuel and parts locally, supporting those local businesses that rural areas need. We employ five full time employees, all from our local area."

– Ethan Gevry, Gevry Firewood

Every successful Vermont working lands business impacts our state's rural economy, a distinct element the WLEB Board considers when processing grant applications. Gevry said their firewood operation reaches many other Vermont businesses in its day-to-day operations.

The potential growth of Gevry Firewood and other Vermont working lands enterprises highlights the importance of our rural economy and the



employment, sustainable product, and community provided by these successful businesses. “The grant activities will put our business in a very good position where we can easily scale to meet market demands,” Gevry said. “The grant has helped us increase production and, in the spring of 2023, we will construct storage to be able to better serve our customers by having a stockpile of ready to deliver wood at any given time rather than cutting to order.”

“Our hopes and dreams for the business is that we can scale to an 8 to 10 thousand cord a year operation by 2025, which would create another six to eight full-time jobs as well as put over \$2 million dollars a year into Vermont’s forest economy.”

– Ashlie Gevry, Gevry Firewood

Working lands enterprises increase the resiliency of our rural economy and support Vermont’s unique sense of place. Ashlie Gevry said their plans for the future will establish them as a contributor to their local economy for many years to come.

Gevry Firewood and the Working Lands Enterprise Initiative share the common goal of increasing the success and prosperity of Vermont’s forest economy.

GRANT AWARD: \$250,000

PROJECT: INCREASING FIREWOOD PRODUCTION OVER 6X TO ADDRESS INCREASING MARKET DEMAND

JOBS CREATED: 10

Read the full story at
workinglands.vermont.gov/blog/gevryfirewood
or scan the QR code.





NEK GRAINS

GROWING VERMONT'S GRAIN SUPPLY

In the food world, Vermont is perhaps best known for local cheese, maple syrup, meat, and produce. It's not a place most associate with wheat production. Much of the flour in Vermont is a commodity shipped from out-of-state mills.

Shawn and Sara Gingue, co-owners of Gingue Family Farm, home to NEK Grains, are part of a small group of grain producers in the state working to change that.

"When customers are at their farm store in Waterford, where they sell their flour, beef, and local maple syrup, they often ask "What is this? How is it different than the stuff you see in the grocery store?," said Sara."

Though it's rare to see Vermont flour, it wasn't so long ago that flour was a mainstay of the Green Mountain State's economy. Vermonters farmed approximately 40,000 acres of wheat in the early 1800s, providing most of the flour in the Northeast.

Depleted soils, the introduction of railroads, and the Erie Canal created competition from other states. By 1950, only 900 acres of wheat were in production in Vermont. New England mills went out of business, and many of Vermont's wheat farmers switched to sheep and then dairy farming.

Gingue Family Farm's story is one of the cyclical nature of farming. A dairy farm since 1950, the commoditization and oversupply of milk nationally led the family to stop milking cows in 2015. Like many other dairy farmers, they decided to diversify and differentiate themselves from commodity products to be more profitable.

Increasing consumer demand for Vermont-made food created an opportunity to bring grain production back to Vermont and for the Gingues to join the movement. The first thing you'll see on the NEK Grains packaging is, 'Grown in Vermont, Milled in Vermont.'



“We want people to connect and to know there’s an actual physical location they can visit and watch the flour be milled or look out at the field and see the grains growing.”

– Sara Gingue, NEK Grains

“In 2020, they sold their first bag of flour. Today, they sell grain to over 20 wholesale buyers, wheat berries to bakeries and breweries, and flour and pancake mix to various specialty food producers, co-ops, and bakeries.

They don’t own a mill, so they drive two hours round-trip to Elmore Mountain Bread each week, where 300 to 500 pounds of their wheat is milled into 50-pound bags of flour.

Sara then packages it into smaller bags on their commercially licensed home kitchen island. She fits it in between homework and mealtimes for their four children. With the time it takes to drive to Elmore and then package the flour, there is no room for growth.

A Working Lands Enterprise Initiative Grant is making scaling up possible. In 2022, NEK Grains received \$25,000 to purchase their own mill and expand their farm store to allow for a designated order fulfillment space. The project is slated to be completed in early 2023. If NEK Grains runs the mill at full capacity five days a week, they can make 800 pounds of flour daily or 4,000 pounds a week, a 700 percent increase in production capacity.

GRANT AWARD: \$25,000

PROJECT: ONSITE MILLING OF 4,000 LBS OF WHEAT PER WEEK

Read the full story at
workinglands.vermont.gov/blog/nek-grains or scan the QR code.



WORKING LANDS ENTERPRISE BOARD

The Working Lands Enterprise Board (WLEB) represents an agency triumvirate and a cross-sector network of partners: Vermont Agency of Agriculture, Food & Markets, Vermont Forests, Parks & Recreation,

Vermont Agency of Commerce and Community Development, numerous designated board members from across the value chains of Agriculture and Forestry, and Ex-Officio members from the Vermont Economic Development Authority, Vermont Housing and Conservation Board, and the Vermont Sustainable Jobs Fund.



ANSON TEBBETTS | CHAIR
Secretary, Vermont Agency of Agriculture, Food & Markets

ALYSON EASTMAN | DESIGNEE
Deputy Secretary, Vermont Agency of Agriculture, Food & Markets

MICHAEL SYNDER
Former Commissioner, Department of Forest, Parks & Recreation

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TAYT BROOKS | DESIGNEE
Deputy Secretary, Vermont Agency of Commerce & Community Development

RANDALL SZOTT | DESIGNEE
Vermont Agency of Commerce & Community Development

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Vermont Community Loan Fund, Montpelier
Member who is an agriculture and forestry enterprise funder

MEGAN COWLES CAMP
Shelburne Farms, Shelburne
Member who is an employee of a Vermont Institution engaged in agriculture or forestry education, training or research

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North Woods Forestry, Montgomery
Member of the VT forest industry who is a forester

DONNA YOUNG
Judd's Wayeeses Farm, Morgan
Member who is actively engaged in commodity maple production

DAVE HUBBARD
GMC Hardwoods, Norwich
Member who is actively engaged in wood products manufacturing

BOB LESNIKOSKI
Vermont Cranberry Company, E. Fairfield
Member who is actively engaged in on-farm value added processing

ALISON LOW
Northeastern Vermont Development Association, St. Johnsbury
Member with expertise in rural economic development

MARISA MAURO
Ploughgate Creamery, Fayston
Member with expertise in sales, marketing and market development

TYLER MILLER
Vermont Land Trust, Montpelier
Member with expertise in land planning and conservation efforts that support Vermont's working landscape

ALISHA UTTER
Arbor Farmstead, Grand Isle
Member involved in production agriculture whose primary enterprise is not fluid milk

Ex-Officio, Non-Voting Members

GUS SEELIG
Vermont Housing and Conservation Board, Montpelier

ELLEN KAHLER
Vermont Sustainable Jobs Fund, Montpelier

SARAH ISHAM | DESIGNEE
Vermont Economic Development Authority, Montpelier

Thank you to all past Working Lands Enterprise Board members for serving Vermont!

One member who is a consulting forester

Kurt Zschau, New England Forestry Consultants | 2012–2014
Joe Nelson, Upland Forestry | 2014–2018

One member who is actively engaged in maple production

Emma Marvin, Butternut Mountain Farm | 2012–2018
April Lemay, April's Maple | 2018–2021

One member with expertise in sales, marketing, or market development

Eric DeLuca, Leverage Point Consulting | 2012–2021

One member who is actively engaged in on-farm value added processing

Eleanor Leger, Eden Ice Cider | 2012–2015

One member who is actively engaged in manufacturing or distribution of Vermont agricultural products

Mark Curran, Black River Produce | 2015–2018
Jeremy LaRock, Cabot Creamery | 2018–2020
Annie Rowell, Sodexo | 2020–2022

One member actively engaged in primary wood processing or logging

Ken Gagnon, Gagnon Lumber | 2015–2017
Jeff Hardy, Cersosimo Lumber Co. | 2017–2019
Trevor Allard, Allard Lumber | 2019–2020

One member who is actively engaged in wood products manufacturing

Mike Rainville, Maple Landmark | 2012–2014
Chris Castano, Champlain Hardwoods | 2014–2017

One member involved in production agriculture whose primary enterprise is not fluid milk

Brian Kemp, Mountain Meadows Farm | 2012–2017
Jane Sorenson, River Berry Farm | 2017–2021

A member with expertise in rural economic development

Robin Scheu, Addison County Economic Development Corporation
2015–2017
John Mandeville, Lamoille Economic Development Corporation
2017–2021

One member who is representative of Vermont's dairy industry who is also a dairy farmer

Amanda Thurber, Lilac Ridge Farm | 2012–2013
Beverly Thurber, Lilac Ridge Farm | 2013–2016
Johanna Laggis, Laggis Brothers Farm | 2016–2018
Beth Kennett, Liberty Hill Farm | 2018–2022

Vermont's forest industry member who is also a working forest landowner

Kathleen Wanner, Vermont Woodlands Association | 2012–2020

A member with expertise in land planning and conservation efforts that support Vermont's working landscape

Gil Livingston, Vermont Land Trust | 2015–2016
Siobhan Smith, Vermont Land Trust | 2016–2022





*“Investing in Working Lands is smart public policy. Vermont would not be Vermont without **Agriculture** or **Forestry**. Grants from the Working Lands Enterprise Initiative grow our economy while making it more affordable to do business in the Green Mountains.”*

– Anson Tebbetts

Secretary, Vermont Agency of Agriculture, Food & Markets

CURRENT PROGRAM STAFF



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PROGRAM MANAGER



DIANE FERGUSON
GRANTS & CONTRACTS
SPECIALIST



CLARE SALERNO
PROGRAM SUPPORT
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Questions?

Contact agr.workinglands@vermont.gov
or 802-917-2637

“Together, we can declare that the working landscape of farms and forests is core to Vermont’s sense of place and cultural identity and essential to our economic destination.”

– Action Plan of the Vermont Working Landscape Partnership, 2012



The mission of the Vermont Working Lands Enterprise Initiative is to strengthen and grow the economies, cultures, and communities of Vermont's working landscape. The Working Lands Enterprise Board achieves this by making essential, catalytic investments in critical leverage points of the Vermont farm and forest economy and facilitating policy development to optimize the agricultural and forest use of Vermont lands.

Photos left to right courtesy Fat Sheep Farm, Gabe Russo of Southwind Forestry, Scott Farm Orchard, and Winterwood Timberframes

