

Farmland Access Program: Helping Farmers Gain Access to Quality, Affordable Farmland

Since 2004, the Vermont Land Trust's Farmland Access Program has provided farmers with opportunities to purchase or lease affordable farmland so they can start up or expand agricultural businesses.

Why did we create this program?

Gaining access to high quality, affordable farmland is one of the most difficult obstacles for beginning farmers and expanding agricultural operations. The challenge is especially acute for enterprises that depend on being near Vermont's economic growth centers—areas where land values remain strong.

As more farms are put up for sale as a result of an aging farmer population and uncertainty in the dairy industry, the question of whether the land will be farmed or will remain available for local food production is a growing concern. The future of farming depends upon skilled, entrepreneurial farmers and their access to high quality, affordable farmland.

What are the goals of this program?

Our goal is to facilitate the creation of diverse farm enterprises in Vermont. We strive to provide qualified farmers who want to create or expand farm operations with access to good agricultural land. We assist with the start-up or expansion of commercial agricultural businesses. Land conservation, business planning, and long-term productive use of farmland are all important components of this program.

What help does VLT provide?

- We search for Vermont farms that are suitable for diversified farm operations; if we secure funding, we purchase those farms and conserve them with conservation easements. We then sell these farms at affordable prices to qualified farmers.
- We facilitate lease-purchase and long-term lease opportunities on land owned by us and by private landowners.

Spencer and Jennifer Blackwell were not new to farming when they purchased the conserved Elmer Farm in East Middlebury; they had 20 years of farming experience between them, much of it at the Intervale, where they leased land.



VLT purchased the Elmer Farm for \$445,000, with support from the Town of Middlebury, the Freeman Foundation,

and several private donors. VLT then conserved the farm and sold it to Spencer and Jennifer for \$240,000. The value of the farm is now restricted to its agricultural value.

The Blackwells have established a CSA (community support agriculture enterprise), a grain processing and milling facility, and greenhouses to extend their growing season; they are now developing value-added products such as, flour, canned vegetables, and vegetable oil.

- We maintain a list of people looking for farmland and contact them when we first hear about opportunities.
- We purchase conservation easements to help lower the cost of farms. We work directly with farmers wishing to buy a farm being sold above agricultural value and with farmers wishing to sell a farm to another farmer.

In conjunction with the work outlined above, we help secure business planning services through the Vermont Housing and Conservation Board Farm Viability Program, and assist in obtaining appraisal work necessary for land purchases. We also work with farm lenders to evaluate opportunities, help facilitate farmland transactions, and assist farm seekers through the process of purchasing a farm.

We work with the Beginning Farmer and Land Access Program, a program of the UVM Center for Sustainable Agriculture, and we collaborate with regional food centers in Vermont such as the Intervale Center, Rutland Farm and Food Link, and Center for a Sustainable Agricultural Economy, to secure the land base needed to support Vermont's local food system.

Do I qualify for this program?

Candidates must have three years of farming experience, strong agricultural references, plans to develop an agricultural enterprise that would gross \$100,000 per year within five years of start up, and sufficient financial resources (or the ability to be financed) for start-up expenses. We focus our efforts on farms producing food and fiber that would use at least 25 acres of productive land.

How can I learn more?

For more information about the Farmland Access Program, contact Jon Ramsay, Farmland Access Program Director at jramsay@vlt.org or (802) 533-7705.



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