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Unity Food Hub:

Creating New Opportunities for Local Farms

by Michael Gold

In recent years, the number of new farms has exploded in the region around Unity, Maine. The majority of these new farms serve direct markets; that is, they don't sell to a broker or commodity-scale buyer that sources product from multiple farms. Instead, they sell direct to local wholesale or retail customers, limiting the number of transactions between the producer and the end user. This has been a successful strategy for many farms across the state.

But as more and more small farms take root and hope to grow, some of the market venues that have aided direct marketing—such as farmers' markets and natural food stores—are reaching points of saturation. This is particularly true in poorer, less-populated regions such as Unity, where local opportunities for farming are beginning to exceed the local demand for farm products, even as local demand grows. As a result, many Unity area farmers are welcoming a new strategy for marketing their products—the creation of a so called food hub.

A food hub is defined by the USDA as “a centrally located facility with a business management structure facilitating the aggregation, storage, processing, distribution, and/or marketing of locally/regionally produced food products” (www.ams.usda.gov).

Food hubs can be formed in different ways to serve different needs. At their core, they are all about increasing opportunities for local farmers. In the Skowhegan area, a food hub is being organized principally around the production and milling of grain. In the Unity area, the focus is on aggregating local vegetable production, so that more of what is grown in this

area might serve larger wholesale markets, yet in ways that retain maximum value for participating farmers.

Maine Farmland Trust is taking the lead to develop this food hub, as it is committed to keep farming viable in a myriad of ways, including developing appropriate community-scale infrastructure. The Trust is currently undertaking a comprehensive business-planning process for a new facility that might employ any or all of the following functions: dry storage, cold storage, limited processing (principally for select institutional markets), and the possible creation of new retail venues, including a multi-farm community-supported agriculture (CSA) and/or a catering operation serving communities beyond the Unity area. One of the many advantages of this food hub is that it will create more efficient ways of complying with increasingly stringent regulations on how crops need to be handled after harvest.

At the same time that the food hub is intended to create new opportunities for local farmers to market outside the immediate area, it is also being designed to better serve the local population. The facility will likely also sell product directly, creating a supplemental marketing option to the local weekly farmers' market.

If Maine is to see the number of small farms continue to grow, one of the keys is to create new ways to get farm products into the hands of consumers efficiently and conveniently. Many strategies warrant active pursuit—including food hubs. 🐾