

**FARM FOCUS GROUP**  
**Focusing on Farmers' Business and Technical Needs Notes**

Thursday, February 11th, 2010 – 10am – 1pm  
Keene Public Library, Heberton Hall, 60 Winter Street, Keene

**1. How will you know that your farm business is successful?**

To be able to not need an outside job in order to survive. We went from 2 to 1 income 3 years ago, but we still need an outside income for health insurance and to pay the bills.

We survive without outside income, but we don't have health insurance—it is one of the hard things for small farmers. People with family have a harder time making that decision. Being successful would be being able to just work on the farm and afford health care. Pattie feels successful because she is so happy about what she does every day. When customers tell me how much they love something, it warms my heart...but I am a little concerned.

Being self-sufficient. Not just enough income, but regular income. Winter CSAs, sell meat, but the volume is all over the map in the winter. If you have a more regular market; No health insurance, retirement fund. 3 generations doing work cooperatively—it is so hard to measure success because it is different. When people write thank yous saying this was the best steak I've ever had. The big successes and the little successes are important—community support.

The big success is community. Left great job with good income, health care because she wanted to feel part of something good, something healthy and an important part of the world. When your customers understand the cost of what you are growing for them—we have been mis-educated by Walmart about costs for a dozen eggs, a pound of wheat. People are starting to become more aware of the cost of feed, but we have a long way to go.

I charge \$5/lb for meat (turkey, duck, pig) across the board, and people don't push back, because they have met the turkeys and see they are the happiest birds alive and it is a guilt-free purchase.

We shouldn't have to fight every day to be heard—by the City Council, State Legislature. We shouldn't have to be enduring. Regulations that would make it conducive to succeed as a small farmer.

Economics is part of sustainability—to be able to support yourself. I want to feel good about what I do. My plans are hopes—hope to offer employment to other people who want to be doing this as well, to make my living this way and offer something to the community and individuals in the community, not just

my customers. People working with me, not for me...that would be a factor of success.

I've been milking for 10 years now—raw milk from the farm. 5 years ago, I tried to figure out my hourly wage, and stopped quickly, and I know I can't. I'm walking the line of being so small and providing good food for the community, but we are closed in this big system that doesn't really allow it. I choose to pay for health insurance, but it is hard to figure out how to make it in this system.

## **Labor**

From planning POV, I want to see my farm grow to 5-6 acres of cultivation, but once you get past 2 acres, you can't do it yourself, so there is going to be a need for extra people.

For me, success is the ability to remain small. Remaining small is a very important choice—more providers. Support for small business structure—subsidizing large farms and things that are not healthy for us—need to get more local and national government support.

Interns and apprentices—hard for me to find the right person who I would trust to feed my animals, take care of them. I have not yet found somebody that I am willing to trust.

My interns and apprentices come for 6 months to bring in enough revenue to feed myself, feed them, care for the farm, but I can't afford to invest enough to keep them there longer—it is a vicious cycle.

We're organic, pasture based chick and turkeys. The demand is growing—do we get bigger? How many times can we get bigger and balance life, school, and education? If people show up to get their chicken and my Dad isn't there, are people going to be upset and stop coming? If we have paid people there that are not our family, how do we find someone who we can hire year round with inconsistent income and will they be as committed and as passionate as we are. Skilled, committed labor year-round is very hard.

I need people in the summer to pick berries, but we don't want just anyone. There are 2 young women who have been with me for more than 10 years, I pay them \$15/hr—a lot for farming—and I try to find work for them all year round, but it is really hard to find them work in the winter. If you love your business, you need the people who work with you to share your mindset and your "heartset".

## **2. What needs do you have as a business owner?**

Struggle is figuring out cash flow. You have a tone of expenses at the beginning of the season, and don't have income. I don't want to borrow money, and have to pay back a huge loan. I have studied grants out there, but I haven't been able to figure it out.

You really have to start out with some money, and where does it come from? Putting yourself into debt worries some people more than others.

I need consistent cash flow, labor. Also, technology is a huge need. I need someone that would help me upload photos. Also, if some organization would help pull all grants together and outline qualifications and deadlines.

I don't even have a computer. I need marketing help—help making brochures. Marketing help with delivery help. I spend a lot of time delivering milk, when I should be haying. It is hard to find grants for me—I know there's money out there, but it is hard to take time to find the organization, deadline, qualifications.

Most of us have dial up in the state. It is frustrating to get bombarded by businesses that have the answer for you—look at what I am doing already and then talk with me. I don't have the time to put energy into making the Farmers' Market an amazing destination place—help us with the existing market. I know my numbers well—expenses, where the potential is. None of the farmers have time to invest in the potential. Cheshire County has great resources and farmers use them, but we need help to support the infrastructure that already exists.

Help with the education part. I drink un-refrigerated raw milk. If people knew more about it, maybe they would participate. 24 Carrots said they were doing well, and then they closed their doors. Need a center to market our wares—a co-op, etc.

We're all our own farmer. I can't tell the next farmer how to milk his cow. I probably don't know half of my customers, I've never seen them. Farm Appreciation Night is a good resource to help that. I get word of mouth, phone, and drop off my milk in a garage, and never meet my customers.

The Farmers' Market at the hospital is splitting the places where a farmer needs to pay attention.

It sounds like there are marketing firms for different industries. It seems like this sector needs a marketing firm that would help them figure things out. I need help with financial projections.

We need regular, consistent education of the general consumer. This new local Edible Monadnock looks great. I didn't know you had raw milk. Getting the people around us to know that we exist.

The Weare agricultural Commission is doing is trying to have dinners, and introduce farmers to each other.

Slow food Monadnock is not really tied into anything that is going on here—it is in Peterborough and Hancock that doesn't know we're here.

**3. What resources, programs and people have helped you strengthen your farm business? Why do you think these have worked for you?**

I've been to a number of 4 Things to Consider before Starting Your Own Business. It was really helpful—emotionally, are you ready to start a business? It put me in touch with the things about my personality that would/wouldn't work with my business.

The Small and Beginner Farmers of NH workshop series specifically focusing on women who have been farming who is great. Women are caregivers in the home, balancing books, balancing family, balancing everything. It is being held this winter, and it is a group of wonderful women who I love being around—we are all there helping each other, doing the work together.

- 1) New England Vegetable and Berry Growers Association—workshops and conference in December.
- 2) UNH Cooperative Extension—went to recent Organic Producers workshop up in Plymouth—it had such good info.
- 3) **ATTRA** website: <http://attra.ncat.org/> (National Sustainable Agriculture Information Service). Website has amazing resources. Pulls together a ton of resources and puts it in one place. It has everything, not just organics.

Trouble with hauling animals to processing facility in Goffstown. A mobile processing facility would be great.

Peterborough Grange has been a great philosophical assistance rather than monetary assistance. Group of like-minded people getting together to talk—link farmers with food bank, community suppers, educate about the difference of costs in foods. Also, the grange is starting to work on group marketing. Also, Ideaslist.org is awesome.

Small Business Incubator program at Franklin Pearce—it is okay, but not great. I am hoping to get help with the business side of things. To be more helpful, the students were more invested in it.

VT Grazing Conferences, NOFA conferences, there is not a whole lot of this in this immediate area. Have a local conference here for networking. EQUIP grant from NRCS/USDA was very easy coming from a farmer—this grant paid

for 3 miles of fencing around the entire area. This was a painless grant experience, and something we would have never been able to do.

UNH Cooperative Extension, Cheshire and Sullivan County—looks at numbers, practice, very knowledgeable about practices and very helpful to get over a hump and meet with you as an individual.

#### **4. What keeps your farm business from supporting you and your family?**

Health insurance. We need to have health insurance—it would cost us more to have it than to not have it. Costs \$1,800/month for just 2 of us.

##### HEALTH INSURANCE.

Try to add value to what you do, but you have to choose to be small, and choose to make less income. To get more income you have to grow, but you only have 2 hands. Not being able to provide enough finances or put things aside—parents say we need to put things aside. Financial planning for the long term.

In the end, I have to do it my way and figure out how to pay for my health insurance. It's been 12 years that I've been stuck on spin cycle. I charge \$9/gallon for milk—a fair price—I would need to charge \$15/month to pay the bills and I am not able to have free time with my family. For spiritual and mental health, we can't take breaks.

My husband and I have had 2 nights away from home in the last 25 years.

Time is challenging, always having to be there. There are some ways in which someone could step in (paid for by a grant) but nobody else can run the farm as well as you can. I think it going to take 3 generations to get the farm back to where it will be a valuable enterprise. I need to plant trees now so that they will fruit 20 years from now. We are investing—planting perennial borders, learning rotational sequences in the field so they are working economically and building up fertility. Our costs now are higher now than optimum—need for bridging the cost the society is willing to pay and the cost we need to produce. We should be putting far more into our soils, but it will take awhile to get it back.

Most farms can't afford to have 6 acres out of tillage to enhance soil fertility.

We spend out money on fencing rather than retirement. We continually make those choices. I can't fence as fast as my herds grow.

We have a lot of needs that can't be met by the farm. We need a network for bartering—exchanging food for fencing, etc. It is something that could help us.

Small and Beginner Farmers network—asked if people had any old tunnel skins and got an answer within a day.

### **5. What long-term goals do you have for your farm business and how will you finance these projects?**

I'd like to make cheese someday. I'd like to make some capital improvements on the farm—repair the barn, find ways to move the cattle around--and improve my living conditions. We've gotta think outside of the box for us to make it--get roller derby girls and finance my farm.

For any of us to succeed we have to really find out niche and work towards bigger and better things. Some people think this is idealistic. We will succeed by finding out niche—something that makes you stand out from everyone else. We are looking to the future, hoping to be sustainable—hoping to grow our own grain, energy independence through grants.

Thinking about our products--locally raised beef, pork products—my wife and I said we shouldn't carry heifer cows through the winter, but you need them for marketing in the winter. I would do much better as a broker and go visit people I've met over the years and buy animals from them, raise them through the summer, and then sell them in late fall. If everyone have animals and works together, it is actually kind of fun. You can give a fair price—it costs as much to raise a young calf through the winter. Old farmers—never get rich—they never got away, had tons of kids for farm labor.

### **6. Other than the things that are out of your control (weather, economy, etc.) what is your greatest challenge to being profitable?**

Fencing. Lots of land, lots of critters. We lose a lot of animals to predators because of fencing. In order to grow, I need to fence the next paddock.

We've managed to keep this small, organic farm growing for the past 25 years, but the major challenge is labor, especially as I age. It's hard to pay a decent wage and then still be able to sell your stuff for a price that people are willing to pay. Our taxes are greater than our income. CISA's Local Hero Campaign—1,500 people came out in 2 hours. If we could do something similar in our area—work on local branding, use Monadnock Radio. People came to that like it was like a religion.

Utilities, taxes—our taxes have more than doubled in 11 years.

Distribution—takes time away from farm work. Local distribution business would be great. Inspection should come out of the state budget.

Tapping into the next ring of consumers that surround us every day and educating us. How do we recreate consumer habits? How do we educate?

I would like our region to go would be much more integration of the farming community—to brand a group of small farmers working together. Like the Intervale in Vermont, all down river valley, have a CSA, delivery CSA, someone doing cows, chickens, all individual farms in the food shed are integrated and coordinated. If I need high-calcium limestone, I have to go to Vermont.

**Websites that have good info about local events/foods:**

- Valley Food and Farm—Send them your press release and they post stuff.
- Local Harvest
- CCCD Website
- Hannah Grimes website and newsletter