

Collaborative Project Will Increase Distribution of Food Produced by Vermont Organic, Fair-Labor Farms

Four Vermont-based organizations—The Northeast Organic Farming Association of Vermont (NOFA-VT), Vermont Way Foods, Food Connects, and Migrant Justice—have teamed up on a new project that will expand the market for Vermont foods produced with organic methods and fair labor practices. The project aims to support Vermont's organic farmers, farmworkers, and broader communities by distributing more Vermont organic food throughout the region.

Together, the partners will:

- **Create New Products:** Vermont Way Foods will bring new organic fresh produce, dairy, maple, and other products to market, selling food from local, organic farms under a unified Vermont Way Foods brand. Where applicable, the products will be produced on farms enrolled in the Milk With Dignity program. The brand will be distributed by Food Connects, an established Food Hub, across the region.
- **Grow Markets:** The partners will help Vermont's farmers reach more customers by forging new sales channels between local, organic producers and wholesale buyers, using consumer research to inform which sales channels will be most successful for the farms. This will not only benefit farmers but also give more people access to organic goods produced with fair labor practices, both in Vermont and in nearby markets.
- **Increase the Demand:** Through marketing and consumer education in Vermont and the region, we aim to increase awareness and demand for local, organic products.

All four partners will work together over the next three years to meet these initial goals. These are crucial steps forward as we continue to work towards an economically viable, ecologically sound, and socially just Vermont agricultural system.

This project is funded in part by a \$1 million grant awarded to NOFA-VT from USDA's Organic Market Development Grant (OMDG) Program.

Quotes from the partner organizations:

“Opening up new markets for local, organic, and fairly produced food is a necessary step towards a more just and sustainable food system in the northeast. We're excited and grateful to have the chance to work with these excellent collaborators to make this happen.” -Grace Oedel, Executive Director at NOFA-VT

“We are excited to work towards the launch of new organic dairy products coming from farms with dignified labor conditions. This initiative will expand the worker-driven Milk with Dignity Program beyond our initial, successful collaboration with Ben & Jerry's to cover new farms and protect more farmworkers.” -Marita Canedo, Migrant Justice

“Food Connects is thrilled to continue our market development work and to add this collaboration focused on organic and fair labor dairy products in Vermont.” - Richard Berkfield, Food Connects

“Early on we determined that certified organic would be a central component of our Vermont Way Foods brand. This collaborative project is a huge step forward for us, and we’re thrilled for the opportunity to accelerate this work, while also adding a fair labor component as we look to launch into the dairy category”- Matt Landi, Vermont Way Foods

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The Northeast Organic Farming Association of Vermont (NOFA-VT) promotes organic practices to build an economically viable, ecologically sound, and socially just Vermont agricultural system that benefits all living things. NOFA-VT was founded in Putney in 1971, making it one of the oldest organic farming associations in the United States. Learn more at nofavt.org.

Food Connects is an entrepreneurial non-profit that delivers locally produced food as well as educational and consulting services aimed at transforming local food systems. The Food Hub aggregates and delivers from over 125 regional farms and food producers to over 280 buyers in southeast Vermont, southwest New Hampshire, and western Massachusetts. Their educational services focus on Farm to School programming. Acknowledged as a statewide leader, the program supports over 30 schools to increase local food purchasing, school meal participation, and food, farm, and nutrition education. Together these core programs contribute to a vibrant local economy by increasing local food purchases by schools and improving students’ nutrition and academic performance. Food Connects is frequently hired to provide leadership and consulting services for efforts to support food systems initiatives throughout New England and act as a catalyst for change.

Vermont Way Foods was created as a co-owned L3C by four non-profit food hubs here in Vermont and launched into the market in the fall of 2022 with a selection of fresh, organic Vermont-grown produce. The line expanded in 2023, securing a major retail partnership with 88 Market Basket locations across New England. With further growth planned for 2024, Vermont Way Foods is developing additional certified organic Vermont products, including dairy, maple, and value-added items. Vermont Way Foods' primary goal is to strengthen local elements of the New England supply chain while providing Vermont producers with access to larger markets, especially those in more populated areas to the south.

Migrant Justice is a Vermont-based human rights organization founded and led by immigrant farmworkers. Since 2009, Migrant Justice has organized the farmworker community and allies in Vermont and surrounding states to improve labor conditions and protect rights. Migrant Justice has successfully fought for changes in state law to expand access to driver’s licenses, healthcare, and Covid relief, while passing policies to address police discrimination. In 2018, the organization launched Milk with Dignity, a worker-driven social responsibility program for the dairy industry. Milk with Dignity brings together workers, farmers, and dairy buyers to support farms, improve conditions, and prevent abuses.