

Farms and Families

Background

In the 1830s, sheep farming formed the backbone of Vermont's agricultural economy, but in the 1840s, it declined sharply. After the Civil War, the number of dairy farms began to increase, and Vermont eventually became known as a dairy state. In 2009, sales of dairy products brought in more than \$338,000,000, representing about 65% of Vermont's total farm receipts. Still, Vermont produces a relatively small amount of America's dairy products—about 1.4% of the dairy farm receipts nationwide.

In the past 60 years, the number of dairy farms in Vermont has dramatically declined. In 1947, Vermont had 11,206 dairy farms. By 2010 only 1,055 remained. The main reason for the closure of dairies is the often low and unreliable price farmers are paid for their milk.

Dairy bottlers, cheese producers, and other purchasers buy milk in units of 100 pounds, which is known as a hundredweight. In July, 2008 for example, dairy farmers in Vermont received about \$20 for 100 pounds of milk. One year later, that price had dropped to \$13.81. The price it cost a farmer to produce that hundredweight of milk was over \$17.88.

Vermont farmers compete with huge farms in California, Texas and the Midwest that can produce milk at a much lower cost and still make a profit. The ownership of dairy processing facilities by large corporations also plays a role in the problem. Vermont farmers often have little choice of where to sell their milk. Processors keep prices low—and keep most of the profit to themselves.

In 2009, Vermont dairy farms and related businesses were responsible for about 15,000 direct and indirect jobs. Vermont's reputation as a state full of idyllic farms with open fields and beautiful views helps to draw tourists from all over the world. And Vermonters value the traditions and the contributions of family farms to the fabric of our state.

Solving the problems of dairy farmers in Vermont has not been easy. One method used was a guaranteed milk price—if milk prices dropped to a certain level, the government or dairy processors would make up the difference. One such agreement, the Northeast Dairy Compact, was created in 1996. But many people did not feel the program was fair to farmers in states without guaranteed prices. The program was shut down in 2001.

The organic farming and local agriculture movements offer new hope to Vermont's dairy farmers. Farmers who produce organic milk get more for their product. In addition, many traditional dairy farms have begun



Most Vermont farmers still used hand plows and animal power until the second half of the 20th century..

Vermont Historical Society

to diversify, producing everything from vegetables, cut flowers, and maple syrup, to cheeses, grains, poultry and eggs. Many farmers have begun to sell their products directly on the farm or at farmers' markets and keep more of the profit for themselves.

About This Segment

Today, the local, organic, and sustainable agriculture movements are thriving in Vermont. Filmmakers Kate Purdie and Andy Reichsman of Marlboro, VT show how these new ideas are giving hope to one Vermont family, which is using sustainability to keep their traditional farm alive.

Before Viewing

- What role do dairy and other agricultural products play in Vermont life?
- What makes farming such a difficult and often risky occupation?
- What are the personal and economic challenges and rewards of being a farmer in Vermont?
- How are traditional ways of farming in Vermont changing to suit changing times?

Vocabulary

hundredweight: the unit of measurement in which milk is sold by farmers; 100 pounds of milk is a hundredweight. A gallon of milk weighs about 8.5 pounds.

organic farming: a way of growing crops and producing products without using artificial chemicals or fertilizers to kill pests and/or make crops grow

dairy processor: a business that buys liquid milk from farmers, bottles it or uses it to make products such as cheese or yogurt, and sells those products for a profit

agritourism: attracting tourists to farms to buy products and pay to participate in special events

After Viewing

- What changes in the way of doing business have come to the Lilac Ridge Farm?
- Despite these changes, what challenges does the farm face?
- How is the family working to develop closer relations to the community?

Grades 4-5

Ask a Farmer Want to know more about more about life on a Vermont dairy farm? Ask a local farmer. Do some research to find out about dairy farms near your school. Then contact the farmer and invite him or her to come in for a classroom visit. Before the visit, prepare a list of questions. Ask the farmer to bring in some photos or other records of farm life. Record the visit using a digital video recorder or digital audio recorder. After the visit, create an edited record of it to share online.

Vermont History and Social Sciences Grade Expectations

Initiate an inquiry (3-4:1; 5-6:1); Design research (3-4:3; 5-6:3); Conduct research (3-4:4; 5-6:4); Make connections to research (3-4:6; 5-6:6); Communicate findings (3-4:7; 5-6:7); Human interaction with the environment (3-4:12; 5-6:12); Interaction/interdependence between humans, environment, and economy (3-4:18; 5-6:18)

Grow an Organic Crop Want to give organic farming a try? Start by growing some organic greens. In the spring, buy organic seeds for an early crop of greens like lettuce or spinach. Choose an appropriate site at your school, then get started. Be sure to loosen the soil well by digging down and turning it over. Add some compost—it's the secret ingredient of organic gardens everywhere. Eat your greens when they are big

enough. While you wait, learn more about organic gardening. Why do so many people want to eat organic food? Why would anyone care if flowers are organic? Where does compost come from?

Vermont History and Social Sciences Grade Expectations

Human interaction with the environment (3-4:12; 5-6:12); Interaction/interdependence between humans, environment, and economy (3-4:18; 5-6:18); Make economic decisions (3-4:20; 5-6:20)

Help Local Farms Grow Every day, local farmers work to communicate an important message: they have fresh, healthy food for sale, and they want people to buy it. Give these farmers a helping hand by creating posters that support local agriculture. On your posters, show some crops grown locally. Include some good reasons for buying them. You can even include information about local farms. Display your finished posters in a public place such as your local library, food coop, or town hall.

Vermont History and Social Sciences Grade Expectations

Conduct research (3-4:4; 5-6:4); Make connections to research (3-4:6; 5-6:6); Communicate findings (3-4:7; 5-6:7); Human interaction with the environment (3-4:12; 5-6:12); Act as citizens (3-4:14; 5-6:14); Interaction/interdependence between humans, the environment, and the economy (3-4:18; 5-6:18); Make economic decisions (5-6:20)

Grades 6-8

Local Agriculture Map To show the role farming plays in your area, make a local agriculture map. First, decide on a boundary for your map. Then do Internet and telephone research to find out the locations, names, and products of as many local farms within that boundary. Use your research to make a large-scale map of farms, including their products. You may wish to even show locations where local products are sold.

Vermont History and Social Sciences Grade Expectations

Design research (5-6:3; 7-8:3); Conduct research (5-6:4; 7-8:4); Communicate findings (5-6:7; 7-8:7); Interpret geography/solve geographic problems (5-6:11; 7-8:11) Interaction/interdependence between humans, the environment, and the economy (5-6:18; 7-8:18)

Eat Locally at School How does your school support local agriculture? Do an interview with the head of your school food services department to find out. First, prepare some questions. Ask how much local food the cafeteria serves and what local farms provide that food. Find out whether the school plans to add more local foods, and what the challenges of buying food locally are. Report your findings to the class in the form of a short talk. Then lead a brainstorming session to come up with ideas for increasing the amount of local food your cafeteria serves.

Vermont History and Social Sciences Grade Expectations

Initiate an inquiry (5-6:1; 7-8:1); Design research (5-6:3; 7-8:3); Conduct research (5-6:4; 7-8:4); Communicate findings (5-6:7; 7-8:7); Understanding of human interaction with the environment (5-6:12; 7-8:12); Act as citizens (5-6:14; 7-8:14); Interaction/interdependence between humans, the environment, and the economy (5-6:18; 7-8:18); Make economic decisions (5-6:20)

Hidden Heroes One big challenge for Vermont dairy farmers is finding people to work on their farms. Many farmers rely on immigrants from Mexico, Jamaica, and other countries to do the job. These immigrants, many of whom are not US citizens, help Vermont's dairy farms to survive. But they face many challenges, including adapting to a new culture and immigration laws that can make their presence in Vermont illegal. Do research to find out more about these hidden heroes of the Vermont dairy industry, the reasons they are here, and the challenges they face. Present your findings to the class in the form of a short video.

Vermont History and Social Sciences Grade Expectations

Initiate an inquiry (5-6:1; 7-8:1); Design research (5-6:3; 7-8:3); Conduct research (5-6:4; 7-8:4); Communicate findings

(5-6:7; 7-8:7); Understanding of human interaction with the environment (5-6:12; 7-8:12); Act as citizens (5-6:14; 7-8:14); Understand various forms of government (5-6: 15; 7-8:15); Understand issues of human interdependence (5-6: 16; 5-7:16); Interaction/interdependence between humans, the environment, and the economy (5-6:18; 7-8:18)

Grades 9-12

Get Big or Get Out For many Vermont dairy farmers, the choice to stay in business or not has been expressed by one statement: “Get big or get out.” Why do so many farmers feel that transforming into large-scale farming is the only way to survive? Develop a hypothesis or research statement that takes a position on the



Marlboro farmer Ross Thurber feeding milking cows on his Lilac Ridge family farm

question. Then do some research. Prepare a presentation that clearly explains to your audience why farmers often feel they have to make this choice.

Vermont History and Social Sciences Grade Expectations

Initiate an inquiry (9-10:1; 11-12:1); Design research (9-10:3; 11-12:3); Conduct research (9-10:4; 11-12:4); Communicate findings (9-10:7; 11-12:7); Understand human interaction with the environment (9-10:12; 11-12:12); Interaction/interdependence between humans, the environment, and the economy (5-6:18; 7-8:18); Make economic decisions (9-10:20; 11-12:20)

Going Organic The transition to organic farming is helping some traditional Vermont farms to survive. But making

the move to organic isn't easy. Imagine you and your classmates are responsible for a small, 50-cow dairy farm in Vermont. Milk is the farm's only product. The farm is struggling and needs to improve its profitability. Divide the class into small groups. Each group must create a plan for transitioning to organic farming. Plans should include information about the challenges of switching to organic, as well as information about any new crops that might be grown, plans for promoting and selling crops, and even agritourism. Combine the best ideas from each group to create an overall plan for making the switch to organic.

Vermont History and Social Sciences Grade Expectations

Initiate an inquiry (9-10:1; 11-12:1); Design research (9-10:3; 11-12:3); Conduct research (9-10:4; 11-12:4); Develop reasonable explanations that support research (9-10:5; 11-12:5); Communicate findings (9-10:7; 11-12:7); Understand human interaction with the environment (9-10:12; 11-12:12); Interaction/interdependence between humans, the environment, and the economy (5-6:18; 7-8:18); Make economic decisions (9-10:20; 11-12:20)

Comparison Shopping How do Vermont's consumers decide where to spend their money for farm products? Explore this question by shooting video interviews of consumers at a local farmers' market and a local supermarket. Before doing the interviews, prepare some questions about farm products consumers buy regularly and the reasons for buying them where they do. Edit your interviews into a short video. Post it online and encourage local farmers to watch. They might be able to use your findings to attract more customers.

Vermont History and Social Sciences Grade Expectations

Initiate an inquiry (9-10:1; 11-12:1); Design research (9-10:3; 11-12:3); Conduct research (9-10:4; 11-12:4); Develop reasonable explanations that support research (9-10:5; 11-12:5); Communicate findings (9-10:7; 11-12:7); Understand human interaction with the environment (9-10:12; 11-12:12); Interaction/interdependence between humans, the environ-

ment, and the economy (5-6:18; 7-8:18); Make economic decisions (9-10:20; 11-12:20)

On the Road

What better way to learn more about the challenges and changes on Vermont farms today than to visit a local farm? Do research to find a farm in your community. Contact farm management to arrange a visit. Before the day arrives, get ready. Prepare some questions to ask the farmers, and gather the gear you'll need to record the answers. During your tour, shoot video, take pictures, and record audio. Share your tour online so others can enjoy it too.

One source of information about prospective tours is the Northeast Organic Farming Association, or NOFA. You can reach NOFA online at NOFAvt.org. Another source is the Vermont Dairy Promotion Council. You can contact this organization at Vermontdairy.com.

Career Corner: Marketing and Advertising

Farm businesses from large-scale dairy operations to small organic farms need to promote their products. If you have talent as a writer, artist, filmmaker, or computer programmer, you might want to consider a career in marketing and advertising. Working on your own or for an agency, you'll help clients tell the story of a product or service—and figure out how to get that story in front of consumers. It's a job that's always in demand.

RESOURCES

Links

Northeast Organic Farming Association: NOFAvt.org

Vermont Dairy Promotion Council: Vermontdairy.com

Vermont Maple Syrup Producers: vermontmaple.org

Vermont Grass Farmers' Association: uvm.edu/~pasture/?Page=vgfa.html

USDA Economic Research Service (statistics on farm production and sales in the United States): ers.usda.gov

VT Migrant Farmworker Solidarity Project: vtmfsp.org