

## **Farm Connex, a delivery service supporting the needs of farmers.**

Farmers and small business owners are increasingly expected to become experts at packaging, marketing, logistics, and distribution - in addition to responsibly producing their crop(s) with care given to the land, their staff, and their community. Add to this the challenges of operating from a hard-to-reach corner of a rural state, and you see what farmers in Vermont's Northeast Kingdom navigate every day.

Enter CAE Farm Connex...

The Center for an Agricultural Economy (CAE) was founded in 2004 to build a regenerative, just, locally based and healthy food system that creates socially thriving and economically viable rural communities. CAE does this through a range of programs that provide infrastructure, technical assistance, education, capital, and connectivity to local food. A rural food economy cannot thrive without rural communities, so CAE's work addresses both economic and community needs. CAE operates three food hub enterprises: the Vermont Food Venture Center, a shared use processing and aggregation facility for farms and food businesses; [Just Cut, a farm-to-institution program](#) processing local produce into ready to use produce products; and Farm Connex, a farm and food product delivery service and the largest of CAE's food hub enterprises.

CAE Farm Connex facilitates the movement of food and farm products to markets for producers by operating 25 routes per week across Vermont and parts of western New Hampshire. By being both facilitator and service provider, CAE Farm Connex can support producers and communities at the beginning, middle and end of the supply chain. At the beginning of the supply chain CAE Farm Connex picks up products at farms like Sweet Rowen in rural Albany. In the middle of the supply chain, it aggregates products for Deep Root Organic Cooperative from farms including Deep Meadow in Ascutney and Honeyfield in Norwich. By providing cross docking services for producers like Butterworks Creamery, Farm Connex can facilitate the movement of products to larger distributors like United Natural Food Distributors (UNFI). At the end of the supply chain the service delivers products directly to over 350 stores, co-ops, farmstands, and institutions for producers like Strafford Organic Creamery. The service allows direct farmer-to-farmer relationships to occur where products are bought and sold between farmers, resulting in the farmers retaining more of the profit. The goal is to keep CAE Farm Connex a service that is adaptable, nimble, accessible, and impactful across all sectors of our farm economy. "As a rural farm, the opportunity to work with a delivery service like {CAE} Farm Connex has meant that we can continue to make our product available to our customers and grow and expand our territory if we choose without any interruption of service." – Diane Wyatt, Owner, Sweet Cow Farm

CAE Farm Connex has helped fuel the expansion of diversified farms in Vermont. As producers look to expand the produce, meat, value added dairy and grain sectors of the farm economy, reliable transport services are essential. By providing cold and frozen transport, perishable

products can maintain their integrity through the supply chain from farm to destination. Recently more products have been aggregated at processing facilities including several of Vermont's slaughterhouses and the grain malting facility in Charlotte. Farm Connex has been able to provide a reliable service to those producers in getting their product from processing facility to market.

CAE Farm Connex has grown significantly since CAE took on ownership of the service at the end of 2019. The service currently works with about 100 farms across Vermont, but additional partnerships are needed in order to meet the growing demand. CAE works with other food hubs in Vermont and seeks to expand its partnerships with organizations on the western side of Vermont including ACORN and Vermont Farmers Food Center. CAE already works closely with the Intervale Center, Food Connects, and Green Mountain Farm to School, the four organizations having jointly created a new local food marketing business called Vermont Way Foods which seeks to grow markets primarily outside of Vermont for producers. Farm Connex creates a physical link between these hubs, improving the efficiency of moving products throughout the state and sharing resources.

There are many challenges to operating a first and last mile delivery service in a rural state with many farms located on dirt roads. Mud season, snowstorms, processing schedules, dock receiving times – the logistics of what occurs on a day to day basis is daunting. The size, flexibility and ethos of Farm Connex positions the service to reach farms in more remote, rural locations, and those smaller in size, that need perishable products moved to market. In our ability to access these farms, we are increasing geographic and market access equity across the state for producers and filling a gap challenging for the larger for-profit distributors to meet.

Farm Connex has a dedicated and experienced staff who are able to respond to requests in a timely manner. Nearly all the products moved are highly perishable with limited shelf life – if it is not delivered on time, farmers lose money, and perishability can also be a barrier to participation in a traditional distribution model where products are warehoused before being resold. Support from the Working Lands Enterprise Fund will help Farm Connex have more logistics capacity, increase its daily payload capacity, and help develop more routes both in and out of state.

As Vermont's farm economy diversifies, transport services must become more generalized to meet the variety of needs from producers seeking to get their products to ready and eager buyers. Thank you to the Working Lands Enterprise Board for investing in, and supporting this service that is essential to the future of agriculture in Vermont.

CAE Farm Connex: Expanding Market Access for Farms and Food Businesses. CAE Farm Connex Delivers to 12 of the 14 counties in Vermont and Western NH.

