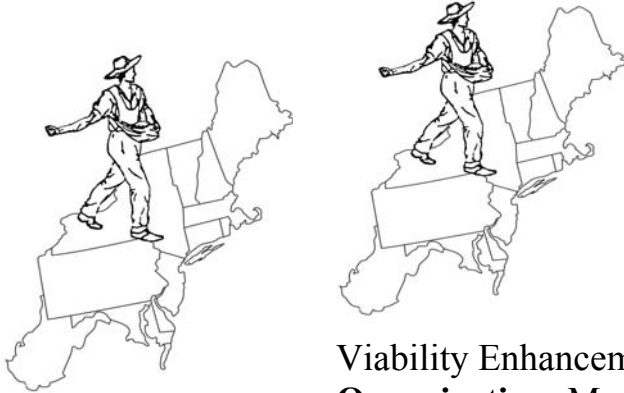


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**Program:** Massachusetts Farm  
Viability Enhancement  
**Organization:** Massachusetts Department of Food &

Agriculture

**Targeted to:** Re-strategizers and Establishers

**Dates:** 1995 to present

**Need**

The Massachusetts Farm Viability Enhancement Program addresses farmers' need to develop viable business plans as the basis of successful businesses. It also meets the need of businesses to have a marketing strategy that allows for diversity and increased market share.

**Program**

The main focus of the Farm Viability Enhancement Program is to strengthen farmers' business skills. At the same time, the program aids farmers in exploring business diversification while maintaining environmental integrity.

The program provides learning opportunities and technical assistance to aid farmers in the development and production of viable business plans. The Farm Viability Enhancement Program also assists participants in developing a marketing strategy. This component helps farmers find ways to increase their market share by moving into retail sales, processing, a broader range and/or different mix of products, or value added.

The program can provide capital ranging from \$20,000 to \$60,000 to farmers who complete their business plans. They use the money to implement their business plans and to improve farm operations.

This program requires at least two years of farm business experience. And participants' gross net income must fall within a specific range for them to qualify.

**Response**

This program has successfully helped 25 to 30 Massachusetts' farmers a year draw up and implement realistic business plans that take into account industry changes brought on by global competition.

Here is an example from the cranberry industry of how the program addresses business skills, diversification, change in response to global conditions and attention to the environment. Massachusetts' many cranberry growers are facing difficult economic times as supply exceeds demand.

To address their plight, the Farm Viability Enhancement Program successfully aided cranberry farmers in diversifying away from cranberry production. It has helped individuals develop businesses that might, for example, move them toward agritourism. The water required for cranberry production might lend itself to the development of a bed and breakfast with picnic areas and canoe rentals. Another cranberry farmer might diversify into processing and produce jams, relishes and other value-added items for retail sale in a farm market.

Farmers can use capital received from the program to build a greenhouse, processing plant or farm market. This helps them to actually implement their business plans.

In accepting program funds, farmers must sign a covenant that requires them to use their land exclusively for agriculture for five or 10 years, depending on the amount of capital provided. This assures that more farms will remain in Massachusetts.

### **Funding**

The Massachusetts State Open Space Bond Legislation funds the Farm Viability Enhancement Program. In the summer of 2002, it provided \$14.5 million to maintain open space in Massachusetts for the next five years.

### **Partners**

The Massachusetts Farm Bureau Federation partners with the Farm Viability Enhancement Program by subcontracting and hiring the accountants and technical consultants used by the program.

The Cape Cod Cranberry Farm Viability Program is also an active partner.

### **Outreach**

Several methods are used to inform the public about the program. The Massachusetts Department of Food & Agriculture's website provides information and application forms. Press releases appear in agricultural publications and in the Department's newsletter. Handouts detailing the program are available at all winter farmers' meetings and farm shows.

### **Analysis**

SUCSESSES. The Farm Viability Enhancement Program has successfully to develop viable business plans. It has also provided the capital for them to implement their plan.

A study completed two years ago showed that farmers who implemented business plans developed through the program had an average net increase in farm income of \$18,500.

Of the more than 200 farms helped by this program over the last eight years, only two have gone out of business.

The Farm Viability Enhancement Program also offers technical assistance, but not capital, to “gentleman farmers” to help them remain viable in today’s economy.

Participating farms are maintained as viable farmland by the covenant, protecting the land from nonfarm use. The threatened family farmer no longer has to sell land that may have rested in family hands for generations to developers who erect cookie-cutter houses and condos.

CHALLENGES. During the first years of the program, the lack of capital due to the state’s austerity budget was a problem.

Currently, there is only one staff person for the program, who also manages the state food cupboards. Additional staff are needed to handle in-house paper work and other program details.

### **Next Steps**

There is a need for an additional program that offers business plan development and implementation to start-up farmers in the first three years of farming. He envisions a pilot program that would limit capital investment to \$10,000 per farm. This program could be helpful to those developing livestock and herb farms.

Just as the cranberry farmers needed help transitioning their farm business to be more viable, last year the state’s apple farmers realized that they also need this type of program to help them through difficult economic times. Because of increased need for assistance, the Farm Viability Enhancement Program must become larger in order to serve more farmers.

Written by: Ruth Maltz, GNF Program Profile Coordinator

### **Additional Resources**

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