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TOP STORY

\$411,000 awarded to Vermont farms: Area farmers receive grants for infrastructure, no-till

By Michael Frett Messenger Staff Writer Dec 5, 2019 Updated 2 hrs ago



St. Albans farmer David Manning, center right, receives a grant award for upgrading his farm's bulk tanks from Secretary of Agriculture Anson Tebbetts, far left, Deputy Secretary of Agriculture Alyson Eastman, center left, and the Vermont Housing & Conservation Board's Gus Seelig, right.

MICHAEL FRETT, Messenger Staff

ST. ALBANS CITY – Dairy farmers in Franklin County and around Vermont received a splash of financial support Tuesday in the form of dairy improvement grants awarded by the Vermont Housing & Conservation Board (VHCB).

Officials from the Vermont Agency of Agriculture joined VHCB leadership Tuesday morning in presenting grants at the Dairy Farmers of America (DFA)'s St. Albans Creamery, where a handful of grantees were present to receive their awards.

"We're here today because farmers are leaders and innovators making investments on their farms and in their communities," Vermont Secretary of Agriculture Anson Tebbetts said. "These dollars will make their businesses more viable."

In total, VHCB, an independent state agency administering grants for housing and conservation, presented \$411,000 in grant funding through the VHCB's Vermont Farm & Forest Viability Program Tuesday.



Vermont Secretary of Agriculture Anson Tebbetts speaks during a ceremony in St. Albans celebrating a Vermont Housing & Conservation Board grant program supporting dairy farms.
MICHAEL FRETT, Messenger Staff

According to VHCB, funding from those grants in turn leveraged another \$700,000 in additional investments, contributions from farmers and grant funding through the Agency of Agriculture and the U.S. Dept. of Agriculture.

Grants were awarded to 12 Vermont farms looking to purchase equipment for tracking their herd or supporting their adoption of no-till farming, where farmers grow crops and pasture without needing to disturb soil through tillage.

Others received grants for expanding physical infrastructure on the farm, allowing farmers to upgrade existing infrastructure or build wholly new facilities on their respective farms.

As several noted, the awards come at a time when farmers continue to be paid less than the cost of production for their milk, a trend that has driven more than 100 Vermont farms to close since 2014, according to the Vermont Milk Commission.

David Manning, a St. Albans farmer who received almost \$34,000 from the VHCB for upgrading his bulk tanks, said he likely would not have been able to afford the upgrades without the grant support.

“Not with the way things have been in the dairy industry,” Manning said. “It’s been tough.”

The upgraded bulk tanks, he said, would help shave almost \$10,000 a year off of operating costs at the Manning Dairy, reducing daily milk truck visits from two visits a day to one now that he will be able to store more milk on the farm.

“It’s not just \$1,000 here or \$1,000 there – this was a lot of money to our farm,” said Kirk Lanphear, a Hyde Park farmer who received \$40,000 to purchase a cow activity monitoring system. “It’s really helped our farm.”

On top of Manning, other Northwest Vermont farmers received grant funding this year through the Farm & Forest Viability Program.

- Fairfield’s Thomas Howrigan, from B&T Black Creek Farms, received \$40,000 to install a new cow identification system.
- Harold Howrigan from the Sheldon-based HJ & A Howrigan & Sons, Inc., received \$31,810 to purchase a no-till drill.
- Mark Magnan and the Magnan Bros. Maquam Shore Dairy were awarded \$40,000 to install a computer cow identification system and purchase automatic take-offs for more efficient milking.
- Sam Bellavance and Alburgh’s Sunset Lake Farm received \$39,000 for a no-till grain drill.

Funding for VHC's Farm & Forest Viability Program's dairy improvement grants comes courtesy of Commonwealth Dairy, which produces Green Mountain Creamery Greek yogurt from a facility in Brattleboro.

According to VHC director Gus Seelig, in leveraging almost \$1.9 million total from Commonwealth Dairy, the dairy improvement grant program has helped bring 10 percent more land into production and brought farmers an 18.6 percent increase in income since the program's inception.

Speaking at the creamery Tuesday, Seelig said the program was "a really important investment and a really important part of our rural communities and our rural vitality and our rural economy."

Seelig emphasized that farmers receiving grants were also contributing to their projects in other ways. "Leverage isn't just a funny thing," he said. "It means farmers are investing their own dollars to make these projects happen."



Hyde Park farmer Kirk Lanphear, a 2019 dairy improvement grant recipient, discusses how the grant helped his family's farm during an awards ceremony in St. Albans.

MICHAEL FRETT, Messenger Staff



Gus Seelig, the director of the Vermont Housing & Conservation Board, discusses the agency's dairy improvement grants during an awards ceremony in St. Albans.

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According to VHCB's Katie Michels, the agency's dairy improvement grants have been awarded to 72 farms since the program's inception, with 60 of those projects now considered complete.

Those projects, Michels said, have resulted in farmers reporting they are more satisfied with the quality of their milk and overall work life.

Almost half of those farmers reported improvements related to water quality and a third reported their soils were healthier, according to Michels.

Commonwealth, which opened its Brattleboro yogurt plant in 2011 and receives milk from farms across Vermont, was purchased earlier this year by the French multinational Lactalis Group, the largest corporate dairy group in the world.