

# Get Fresh Net

## Final Report for CNE08-054

Project Type: Sustainable Community Innovation

Funds awarded in 2008: \$9,658.00

Projected End Date: 12/31/2008

Region: Northeast

State: Maine

Project Leader:

[Tanya Swain](#)

Western Mountains Alliance

## Project Information

### Summary:

The GetFresh.Net project launched an online farmers market modeled on the Plymouth Local Foods project in Plymouth, New Hampshire. Officially named [www.WesternMaineMarket.com](http://www.WesternMaineMarket.com), the website enabled over 200 consumers to purchase local food online for pickup at one of three distributions sites in Farmington and Norway, Maine. Located in western Maine, the purpose of the project is to help the region's predominantly small farmers connect directly with consumers in an effective and efficient marketplace. While interest in local foods is increasing in the region, as evidenced by visits to farmers markets, new local products in grocery stores and anecdotally, consumers are challenged by busy schedules and many different food choices. The purpose of the project was to help at least a dozen farmers connect with these consumers and improve the ability of small and medium sized farmers to sell online and direct retail.

### Project Objectives:

12/2008 - 12/2009

January - March Performance Target: Online website set-up; policies and procedures development; farmer and volunteer recruitment.

Beginning in January we worked closely with Abby Holm of Plymouth Local Foods and Gaia Hosting to set up the website including the PayPal payment option. The advisory committee finalized policies, procedures and contracts for buyers and producers. A dozen farmers were recruited to participate in the launch of the website. We held a volunteer meeting and recruited five volunteers to help at the distribution site. The advisory committee helped us choose the domain name: [westernmainemarket.com](http://westernmainemarket.com).

April - December: Launch website.

The website opened for business on April 3, 2009 with the first Farmington distribution site. We partnered with a local Soil & Water Conservation District to coordinate the distribution site and an intern from the local college to help with marketing the website, especially with creative writing. The website received and

continues to receive much media attention and was featured on the local evening news

([http://www.wcsh6.com/video/default.aspx?maven\\_playerId=articleplayer&maven\\_referralPlaylistId=playlist&maven\\_referralObject=1129257820&maven\\_referrer=staff](http://www.wcsh6.com/video/default.aspx?maven_playerId=articleplayer&maven_referralPlaylistId=playlist&maven_referralObject=1129257820&maven_referrer=staff)) and in the Boston Globe's business section

([http://www.boston.com/business/technology/articles/2009/08/10/virtually\\_delicious/](http://www.boston.com/business/technology/articles/2009/08/10/virtually_delicious/)). In the first month, 85 residents created accounts on the website and 27 purchased items from 13 farms. There are currently 203 buyer accounts on the website and 36 producers. The site was slated to include two distribution areas and in May we joined with an online CSA program coordinated by the Progress Center in Norway, Maine to assist this group in setting up a [westernmainemarket.com/oxfordhills/](http://westernmainemarket.com/oxfordhills/) page with products from the Oxford Hills area. The Oxford Hills site also has over 30 producers listed. Because this page has been coordinated by another organization, we did not evaluate the impacts of the Oxford Hills online page and distribution area.

In July, we set up a second Farmington distribution site in the parking lot of a regional hospital, Franklin Memorial Hospital.

April - ongoing: Market the web site and farmers markets that serve as distribution sites.

Please see accompanying press coverage. In addition, promotion efforts included: Free recyclable Western Maine Market.com shopping bags to the first 10 buyers on the site; Paid newspaper advertising during July - September 2009. Ads were placed in daily publications and weekly publications serving communities up to 45 minutes away from the distribution locations.

In conjunction with our newsprint and online advertising, buyers had the opportunity to win a gift certificate to area businesses if they purchased through the site. We established a Western Maine Market facebook page. Bi-weekly emails with product updates were sent to our database of over 700 people in Franklin County and monthly reminders to our e-newsletter list of over 1700 people throughout the state.

August - December: Connect farmers to new markets & Evaluate website.

In August, a volunteer UMF student began creating evaluation surveys to measure buyer and producer satisfaction with the website. Some key findings were a) 95% of consumers used the website because they wanted fresh, local produce and purchased from the market between 2-10 times in a 28 week period b) 54% of participating farmers experienced an increase in annual sales c) 69% of producers sold vegetables and fruit while 31% sold meat & poultry.

October - ongoing: Provide computer training to assist farmers in marketing online through the web site and independently.

As a result of this project, we were approached last fall by a couple in New Hampshire who attended our Nov 2008 conference with Abby Holm of Plymouth Local Foods. This couple built a website from the ground up based on what they learned at the conference. We will be switching to their platform in the spring. This platform will provide farmers with individual web pages, greater control in listing their inventory and the opportunity to join a number of online markets in multiple communities.

- [Pick up at local farmers market](#)
- [Peter Rose from Channel 6 News - May](#)
- [WMM sign](#)
- [Nov 15 computer technology training](#)
- [Opening day April - Mary picking up her order with WMM bag](#)

- [Andy on Channel 6](#)

## Introduction:

GetFresh.Net sought to address issues of market access by using technology to link small and medium sized farmers with rural consumers who have limited time and/or access to frequent farmers markets or farm stands. In addition, the project sought to increase the capacity of local farmers to use technology in their marketing, a skill that many farmers of modest means have not had the opportunity to develop. The project was, and continues to be, advised by a committee that includes area farmers, an individual with experience in wholesale food markets and distribution, and individuals working in community health and community and economic development.

## Cooperators

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## Research

### Materials and methods:

The project was built on the "Plymouth Local Foods" pilot developed in New Hampshire in 2006 to link small producers with consumers via a virtual farmers market. The Plymouth Local Foods model features the creation of an online farmers market where consumers can select specific products from specific producers and pay online. Payments go directly to the producer who then agrees to drop off the purchased goods at a distribution site once a week. The distribution site is located at the farmer's market.

Our project involved working with farmers in two Maine counties to create a virtual farmers market website modeled on the Plymouth site to market produce in two communities in the region. Distinct from the Plymouth Local Foods model was placement of the initial distribution site at a local grocery store.

The market web site was promoted throughout the university, community college and school districts in the region, at health centers, book stores, libraries, day cares and in local newspapers. In addition, a weekly produce list was emailed to over 700 individuals in the Western Mountains Alliance database and to individuals that signed up to receive these updates.

The project was administered by the Western Mountains Alliance Project Director with oversight, planning and development assistance from a Steering Committee of eight individuals including four farmers and representatives from several agencies working with, or serving, farmers.

A Technical Coordinator designed the website and coordinated communications with farmers and logistics at the distribution sites.

Student interns assisted in meeting with farmers to recruit participants and provide initial information on how the web site operates.

Plymouth Local Foods presented the computer training workshop in Nov 2008 as part of a larger, daylong conference focused on technology and marketing for farms.

- [Westen Maine Market Homepage](#)
- [Nov 15 Conference brochure](#)

#### Research results and discussion:

A total of 36 farmer/producers are listed on the Western Maine Market website. To date (March 1, 2010), the website has received 445 orders, has offered over 700 products and has taken in \$8275 in farmer sales. In May 2009, we partnered with the Progressive center in Norway to add the Oxford Hills Food Coop to the website. Oxford Hills Food Cooperative administers their own site with technical assistance from the Western Mountains Alliance. They have 39 producers and are able to offer delivery services.

The farmers listed on our website elected to continue with the online market through the winter and as a result, opened a winter farmers market located at a local grange.

The project has caught the imagination of local university students who have stepped forward to volunteer. Students have created marketing materials and are currently working with a group of middle school students to produce a public service announcement outlining the various ways one may access local foods. The PSAs will be distributed district wide, on YouTube and shown on public access TV stations throughout the state.

- [UMF Student Intern](#)
- [postcard marketing](#)

### **Participation Summary**

## Education & Outreach Activities and Participation Summary

### **PARTICIPATION SUMMARY:**

#### Education/outreach description:

Staff presented at a number of events and the Western Maine Market was featured in a variety of ways throughout the state in 2009:

Jan 15 - Ag Trade Show - Augusta, ME

Jan 20 - Somerset Heart Health - Skowhegan, ME

Feb 8 -- CSA Fair, Farmington

Feb 10 - Cape Elizabeth Farm Alliance & Portland Council of Governments Conference - Portland, ME

April 5 - Climate Change Summit - Farmington, ME

April 11 - Interviewed on WSKI TV - Carrabassett Valley, ME

May 2- Seabasticook Trade and Community Show - Pittsfield, ME  
May 5 - Interviewed by WCSH TV (<http://tinyurl.com/yjsafuz>) - Statewide  
June 9 - Interviewed by WKTJ radio Health Beat - Franklin County  
July 25 - Strawberry Festival - Farmington, ME  
Oct 17 - Rick Charette Concert, Farmington. ME  
Oct 17 - Chili Cook Out Elks Lodge - Farmington, ME  
Oct 17 - Sandy River Farm Corn Maze - Farmington, ME  
Oct 20 - Mobile Health Unit, Farmington. ME  
Oct 30 - New England regional RC&D conference - Portland, ME  
Nov 20 - Sugarloaf Opening Day, Carabassett Valley, ME  
Nov 27 - Saddleback Opening Day, Rangeley, ME  
Dec 3 - Rotarians, Farmington, ME  
Jan 12 - Ag Trade Show, Augusta, ME  
Jan 13 - Interviewed by MPBN  
(<http://www.mpbn.net/Home/tabid/36/ctl/ViewItem/mid/3478/ItemId/10586/Default.aspx>) - Statewide

As described earlier, advertising in newsprint media was not as effective as anticipated. The most effective advertising was via our email list, by word of mouth and through personal contacts at community events.

- [Boston Globe Aug 2009](#)
- [Daily Bulldog - March 2009](#)
- [Daily Bulldog - Oct 2008](#)
- [Maine Biz August 2009](#)
- [Morning Sentinel June 2009](#)
- [Sun Journal - April 2009](#)
- [Sun Journal - March 2009](#)
- [Morning Sentinel April 2009](#)
- [Sun Journal - Oct 2008](#)
- [Franklin County Chamber of Commerce Visitors Guide](#)
- [Bangor Daily News 11.17.08](#)
- [Franklin Journal Oct 2008](#)
- [Maine Biz](#)
- [Kennebec Journal Oct 2008](#)
- [Sun Journal - Fall 2009](#)
- [Morning Sentinel Oct 2008](#)
- [Public radio interview](#)

## Project Outcomes

Project outcomes:

Through this project, we have been approached by a couple in New Hampshire who attended our Nov 2008 conference with Abby Holm. They built a website from the ground up based on what they learned at the conference. We will be switching to

their platform in the spring ([www.HarvesttoMarket.com](http://www.HarvesttoMarket.com)). This platform will provide farmers with individual web pages and with greater control over listing changing inventory. The site will also make it possible for farmers to join a number of online markets in multiple communities or to set up a unique farm stand.

As stated in Outcomes and Impacts, we have served over 70 local farmer/producers between the two distribution areas (Farmington & Norway). The sites have reached over 200 techno-savvy customers in the Farmington area. All farmers have elected to keep the market open during the winter months, something we had not planned to do. Interest in the online market by both customers and farmer/producers continues to grow. Our partnership with Harvest to Market will encourage growth of the online market model by allowing staff to do outreach to nearby towns and to farmer/producers ready to begin projects in their own communities; thus expanding markets for all. This partnership was not planned, but will guarantee continuation of the market in the coming year.

- [Harvest to Market Homepage](#)

Assessment of Project Approach and Areas of Further Study:

## Potential Contributions

In November, we surveyed participating farmers. Of the 31 farmers who were registered to be a part of the market at that time, 15 consistently provided products for purchase (more than 15 weeks during a 28 week period). The average age of farmers participating in the market is fifty years old. They farm in towns within a 30 mile radius of Farmington. 100% of farmers who answered the survey, saw an increase in sales and gained new customers. Over a 28-week period, farmers generated \$5,064.45 in sales. Annual incomes for participating farmers varied as follows - 45% of participating farmers had annual incomes of \$5000 or less, 27% had incomes of between \$5000 - \$15,000, 9% had incomes between \$15,000 - \$25,000, and 18% had incomes over \$25,000. We noted an uneven distribution of benefits among the farms selling online - most farms had some sales but some farms did very well. In the coming weeks, university students will canvass participating farmer/producers to solicit more information from farms on their experience with the site.

Overall, we felt the project has been very successful. At a meeting with farmers involved in the project last fall, the group overwhelmingly advocated for continuing the site through the winter months. Integral to the project's success, has been the advisory committee's involvement and buy-in from the farming community. Having staff that was comfortable with technology was also important to the project's success, along with the commitment of many volunteers including community members and students from the university who helped with the distribution site and promoting the project in the community.

In addition, although the chosen platform worked without incident, we have realized the need to manage administrative costs and for farmers to have the flexibility to enter their own weekly data and have more control over their pages. An unexpected impact of the site was the role it played in bringing farmers together to work cooperatively on issues related to delivery and distribution, an impact we feel will have positive long-term implications for the farming community in this area.

## Future Recommendations

Elements that didn't work as expected included establishing a site in the Skowhegan community. Perceived competition with an existing farmer's market prevented us from pursuing a site in this community, even after attempting to work with the market to set up the project through its members and at its weekly location. More research is needed to determine benefits to individual farmers and farmer markets.

Our goal at the outset of the project was to make the Western Maine Market site financially solvent. The project is close to breaking even with a 5% charge on sales transactions and reliance on a volunteer who has assumed responsibility for uploading weekly product information and downloading and distributing orders to farmers. In addition the distribution site is manned by the same volunteer. Our interest in converting to new software has been driven in part by our interest in keeping administrative costs low. We also have planned to sell advertising on the site to raise additional revenues if needed. More information on financially sustainable online markets may be helpful to other communities.

Advertising in newsprint media was not as effective as anticipated. The most effective advertising was via our email list, by word of mouth and through personal contacts at community events. More time is needed to carry out a well orchestrated marketing campaign.

Finally, farmers would continue to benefit from small business planning and marketing advice, particularly as it applies to technology.

Any opinions, findings, conclusions, or recommendations expressed in this publication are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the view of the U.S. Department of Agriculture or SARE.



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