

# MASSACHUSETTS Farm to School

## Farm to Institution Viability

### Case Study: E. Cecchi Farms

#### Overview

E. Cecchi Farms is a mid-sized suburban/rural farm located in the lower Pioneer Valley that grows a wide range of vegetables for sale through two primary channels – a farm stand, and wholesale accounts primarily to produce distributors and supermarkets. For the past two years they have sold a variety of vegetables to the Springfield Public Schools by way of a produce distributor and Springfield’s contracted food service management company; Sodexo.

#### Farm Profile

**Farm Name:** E. Cecchi Farms

**Farm Structure:** A family owned and operated farm – run by Michael Cecchi and his brother Bob Cecchi.

**Farm Location:** Feeding Hills, MA (suburban)

**Proximity to Markets:** Very close (Springfield, MA is 8 miles away)

**Acreage:** 80 acres in Feeding Hills, Agawam, MA, 40 acres are owned and 40 acres are rented.

**Sales Channels:** farm stand and wholesale

**Labor:** 2 year round farm managers and 8-10 seasonal field crew (some full season, some summer only); Farm stand has seasonal staff as well.

#### Crops

In order to service the large farm stand and the various large wholesale customers, the farm grows a wide variety of produce—mixed vegetables and fruit. They also have several greenhouses that produce plants and flower baskets for sale in the farm stand. Primary wholesale crops to the public schools have included tomatoes, summer squash, peppers and lettuce.

#### Land

E. Cecchi Farms is located on 80 acres in Feeding Hills, Agawam, Massachusetts. Of these 80 acres, the family owns 40 acres and rents the remaining 40 from other farms or families in the region. The farm is located in the Lower Pioneer Valley with prime agricultural soils as a result of the nearby Connecticut River. The land often abuts neighborhood developments which pose

some development pressures on the farm's active agricultural practices. The owners rely on their longstanding relationships with their neighbors and community members to work cooperatively in establishing agreements on co-existing in the mixed land-use community.

## Sales Channels

The farm has two primary sales channels – a retail farm stand on site and wholesale accounts. The majority of wholesale sales are to area grocery store chains, local restaurants, and traditional producer distributors. The farm had sold to a local school district several years back, but had not been interested in selling to institutions again because of the challenges of delivering directly to the many institution cafeteria locations it had been servicing. The farm was open to working with institutions only when they utilized a distributor to handle the deliveries and other administrative burdens of selling to multiple locations/businesses.

## Adopt-a-Farm Program – Why it Works

During the winter season E. Cecchi Farms was approached by a produce distributor based in Rhode Island to partner with and serve the institutional market in Massachusetts. Based on a model the distributor had been implementing in Providence, RI they worked with E. Cecchi Farms to establish an “Adopt-a-Farm” program for Springfield Public Schools. This program established a working relationship between the school district's contracted food service company (Sodexo), the distributor, and E. Cecchi Farms. This program allowed for Sodexo's Food Service Director to communicate directly with the farmer, along with the produce distributor, about which crops would be the best fit for the district and in what quantities. The farm was able to communicate directly with the Food Service Director on which crops were available when and what varieties and quantities will be planted the following season specifically for the school district. This relationship was particularly beneficial because E. Cecchi Farms was not interested in delivering their products, but were able to work closely with an area school district with the help of the distributor who handled all of the logistics. Because Springfield Public Schools contracts with Sodexo to run their meal program, they had been limited to working with produce suppliers who were approved through their corporate contracting process—none of which included local producers. Because the RI distributor was an approved vendor they acted as the ‘middle man’ but the direct relationship and communications between the farm and school were established over a ‘handshake’ and the farm was afforded the publicity of serving a large area district. Springfield Schools were able to also promote their support of local producers knowing their products were produced specifically for them on a local farm.