



COLLABORATIVE AGGREGATION & MARKETING OF LOCAL FARM FOOD

*A QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS OF
FARMERS' COLLABORATION
STRATEGIES*

UNH FOOD
SYSTEMS LAB



Farmers and community-based organizations across New England are working together to develop collaborative, multi-farm marketing models such as online farmers' markets, food hubs, cooperative farm stores, and community supported agriculture (CSAs). These models can increase market access and reduce marketing burdens, while offering customers greater convenience and choice.

In this brief, we identify common operational challenges, along with the strategies they use to navigate those and other related challenges. The analysis is based on in-depth interviews from 2024-2025 with 32 farmers and 8 managers and staff across four different models in New Hampshire. These insights offer actionable steps to help build more resilient and sustainable collaborations.

Supply & Demand Coordination

- Coordinate crop plans across farms
- Extend seasons to smooth supply
- Expand into new regions or customer bases
- Build producer networks & collaborate on marketing

Transparency & Crop Planning

- Maintain fairness by sharing pricing & volume information
- Hold regular, farmer-led planning meetings
- Build support among similar crop growers

MULTI-FARM AGGREGATION & MARKETING STRATEGIES

- Pilot new crops gradually
- Manage risk with balanced crop variety
- Specialize in manageable quantities
- Offer unique varieties & product formats

Specialization vs. Diversity

- Process or donate gluts & diversify winter offerings
- Supplement local supply with regional sourcing
- Extend the season; adjust staffing
- Target flexible, values-driven customers

Seasonality

SUPPLY & DEMAND



What works?



What's hard?

Farmers marketing together must balance the supply they produce with shifting customer demands. Some farmers have too much supply, leading to waste, and others need to increase their production, while simultaneously managing labor and storage limitations. To collaborate effectively, farmers often need to adjust what they grow, how much they harvest, and which outlets they sell to. Transparency, communication, and coordination are essential to making the collaboration successful.

“We're going to start an herbal collaborative for the state...because, I'm growing some herbs [and] there's another person that's growing. If we pull those together, we can reach customers and bigger networks.”

Strategy 1

To meet customer demand, collaborate across farms to sell the same type of product.

Strategy 2

Attract more customers by increasing the amount and variety of products offered by featuring products from multiple producers.

“If we have more product diversity in the storefront, all producers sell more... because there's more to choose from and it's more of a destination for people.”

“Producers know their customer base. They know specific customers. They know they can reach out to somebody when they need to move something, whether it's a wholesale account or whether it's a longstanding person that always buys their products.”

Strategy 3

Producers know their customers. Keep open channels of communication with other producers to share inside information about customer demand.

Strategy 4

Expand markets by investing supply lines in new regions to develop new types of demand.

“We just got a dairy business and innovation center grant [for] an interstate milk shippable yogurt line, which will allow us to go across state lines with the yogurt, which ought to open up a significant market.”

“Farmers [typically produce] June to October. There's April, May, November, and December. There's a lot of opportunity for folks there.”

Strategy 5

Extend the growing season to sell more products and attract more customers.

Strategy 6

Hold crop planning meetings with all producers in late winter to share plans and coordinate supply among producers growing the same crops.

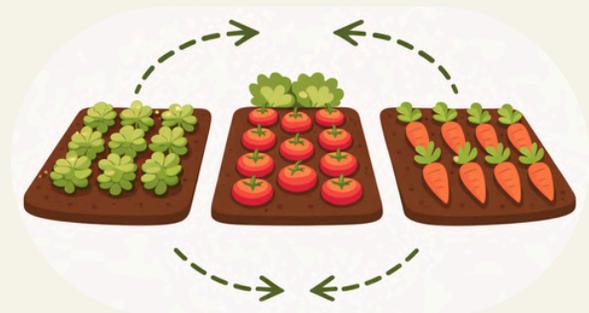
“If there are concerns like, ‘I’m really relying on tomato sales this year,’ then as we’re talking to other producers, we let them know, ‘We’re going to have a primary producer of this product through the season.’”



What’s hard?

To have a successful and mutually beneficial collaboration, farmers must plan together to decide who is responsible for which crops and how they will be priced. It can be a challenge to avoid unintentional competition between farmers over certain crops, and farmers may undercut each other for the same product by setting lower prices. As with other challenges, effective communication is necessary to coordinate crops successfully.

CROP COORDINATION





What works?

Strategy 1

To prevent market oversaturation, coordinate which products are produced across suppliers through crop planning meetings.

“ To lessen the risk of [creating a competitive environment]...we make sure there's communication between us and the producers...We've closely mitigated the risk of that. ”



Strategy 2

Communicate anticipated future production to avoid oversaturation in the market and to preemptively navigate poor growing seasons.

“ When it comes down to it, farmers in general really have their ear to the ground...People are aware of where the market is saturated and where it isn't, where certain seasons will be poor or good, [and they know the] products they'll be able to offer. ”

“ Try to facilitate problem-solving between the group of farmers who are sharing one market source, whether that's a CSA, or the food hub, or food bank contracts. I find that it really works out best when it's the farmers coming up and generating the system that they want to use. ”

Strategy 3

Create a collaboration that empowers farmers to co-design their system of production and sales.

Strategy 4

Cultivate relationships between farmers who already grow and sell similar crops, and build a shared network of technical assistance.

“ [If] I'm going to see if I can move my carrots to [another] outlet, I might call [another farmer] and be like, 'Hey, I know you grow carrots. I have a lot of carrots I need to sell. Do you have any advice?' It'd be like we're in this together. ”

CROP SPECIALIZATION



What's hard?

Having farmers specialize in fewer crops can make collaboration more efficient and mutually beneficial, but it also increases vulnerability. If farmers rely too heavily on one major crop, they could suffer damaging revenue loss if they experience crop failure. Likewise, the collaborative risks losing sales and customers for the entire season if they depend too much on one farmer and they have a poor harvest.

“ We did not choose to go into the hyper-specialized model of, ‘You grow one thing and you grow it really well and you're our carrot guy. Nobody else does carrots.’ If that person doesn't have a good crop, then where are you at? Then you don't have carrots.”



What works?

Strategy 1

Instead of assigning a crop to just one farm, a small number of farmers can grow the same crop and sell it as different products or in different markets.

Strategy 2

Farms might grow fewer crops while focusing on improving the quality and consistency of their items.

“ If we have five people growing the same crop, two of them might be really successful at selling direct-to-consumer market because they have retail pack sizes, and three might only be doing wholesale cases and not doing retail packs...When it comes down to it, there's likely a place for all those items to be sold.”

“ Last year, [I] really tried to identify profitable crops, and just focus on consistency and quality, but [also] consistent numbers every week. I didn't achieve it every week, but that's the goal. Have fewer items that you're offering, but ensure that you can be reliable, that a restaurant or grocery store can know that they're going to be able to see that [reliability]. ”



What's hard?

Customers and different markets demand diverse products, but growing many different crops can be labor-intensive and inefficient. When customers can't find the products they want, sales of other products may also be negatively impacted.

FARM PRODUCT DIVERSITY



“ It has gotten to the point where the local people don't come for eggs anymore, because we don't have any. Therefore, they also don't buy other things...We're putting a little retail space there, and we'll try to redevelop some of that clientele. ”

“ I'm starting a CSA this year, but I [also] have been doing the farmer's market, and so you need to have a diverse amount of crops. ”



What works?



Strategy 2

Sell products similar to others on the market but distinct enough to meet different needs.

Strategy 1

When growing and developing new products, start gradually to see which ones work best.

“ I know it's hard when you're beginning. You're trying to figure out what works and what doesn't. If you're going to try something new, keep it small and then start to gauge and find out what will work and what doesn't, and what's the demand out there. ”

“ I grow these little fairytale eggplants. They're small and tender and don't have seeds...and no one else grows them. I sell out every week...and I sell them to the same restaurants. I'm growing more this year, and maybe I'm growing some things that other farmers don't have interest in growing, like shallots. ”

Strategy 3

Balance crop specialization and diversity by having each farmer grow a handful of different crops.

“ Instead of growing every single crop...you [could] have five or six crops. It's a little less risky, but then you're still specializing a little bit and so you get a little bit more efficiency. ”

VARIETY



What's hard?

It can be difficult for farmers to meet customers' expectations for a wide variety of products. Farmers might feel pressure to grow and sell many different things to offset the risk of losing sales and damaging their relationships with customers.

“ If someone comes to our storefront and they see a handful of items that they want, but [we're missing] many things that they need, they're not likely to place an order. ”

“ It's always good to have more variety because when you bring it to a farmers' market, you will have a variety of customers, and you will want to have enough to be able to attract customers. ”

“ Can you reliably produce all this by yourself, and does that put a tremendous amount of stress on you personally? That's what I used to feel when I was running my own CSA. There was this stress of feel[ing] responsible for that person's vegetables for the week. You've got to plant lettuce every week, and you have to plant broccoli five times a year, and you have to have multiple cabbage plantings and multiple carrots and early and late tomatoes...You have to be good at everything. When something goes wrong, you start feeling like you failed and like the customer is disappointed because they didn't get X, Y, or Z. ”



What works?

Strategy 1

By relying on each other and strategically coordinating production, collaborating farms can deliver the variety of products demanded by their customers.

Strategy 2

By combining a variety of sought-after products with less popular products in the same sales environment, customers might be more likely to purchase those less in demand products.

“That's why I really like this model so much better...you're not counting on yourself to grow everything. You're realizing that other people, by working together, can make life a little bit saner for everybody.”

“It's a balance between trying to make sure there are some really desirable products that people love to see at certain times of the year but trying not to saturate [the market with them]...In the fall, we're talking about turnips, 'it's maybe not that popular, but hey, try turnip out. It's what grows here this time [of year].’”

Strategy 3

Occasionally buy products directly from other farmers who aren't associated with an established collaborative agreement.

“Sometimes, the fruit producers are not interested in going through the paperwork to manage their inventory on the [collaborative] software every week, but they'll sell us blueberries.”





What's hard?

New England's short growing season poses a challenge for collaborative marketing. Customers taper off and may be lost during the off-season and farmers often have an oversupply of products they can't sell during the peak growing season.

SEASONALITY



What works?

“When we figure out who are we targeting with our marketing...a CSA customer is somebody who's into healthy living and local economy...[and they're also] willing to roll with the system and not have complete and total control over what they're getting every week.”

Strategy 1

Put energy into reaching customers who are flexible about what they purchase and are interested in trying new foods.

Strategy 2

Try to extend the season for growing and selling whenever possible.

“Season extension... allows [farms] to access markets earlier, grow more effectively, do better rotations...so how can we make what we have more efficient?”



SEASONAL EBBS



What's hard?

Limited revenue during winter is challenging for maintaining a business. Also, extreme weather events can further impact the growing season and pose even greater financial risks.

“ We've had crazy weather for years. Last year killed all the stone fruit in the area. People were very upset. Why don't we have any peaches? Well, let me tell you why we don't have any peaches. It was negative 40 in February. ”



What works?

Strategy 1

Reduce staffing in the winter.



“ There's seasonality. What do we do? One, we reduce our staffing. We don't carry nearly as many staff in the winter as we do in the summer. ”

Strategy 2

Strategically plan for seasonal sales. In the winter, focus less on selling fresh produce and more on selling value-added products.

“ We change our products. Obviously, [in winter] we're not going to have strawberries on the shelf. We do a lot more candles and maple syrups and jams and jellies. Whereas in the summer, we'll prioritize the strawberries and the peaches and not sell jam and jelly. ”



What's hard?

During seasons when more product is grown than can be sold, farmers need to be strategic about what to do with the excess product.

SEASONAL GLUTS



What works?

Strategy 1

When seasonal gluts occur, create value-added products. Process the excess food into other products or plan to donate it.

“ You don't want the glut until we have a kitchen that can take your glut and make a sauce. I never say you don't want a glut, because we want the food bank donations, and we want the value-added product. If the infrastructure is there to take that glut and get it into situations where food isn't [wasted], let's have a glut and [get paid] for it. ”

“ I guess just going back to communication is just really important so you don't run into everyone producing the same thing. ”

Strategy 2

Develop well-established systems of communication with other farmers to prevent overproduction of a product.



WINTER SUPPLY



What's hard?

The logistics of growing, storing, and selling enough products in the winter is also challenging. Colder weather necessitates infrastructure like heated greenhouses and appropriate cold storage.



What works?

Strategy 1

Procure products from other regions to fill in the gaps of what customers are looking for.



Selling no local products is largely what happens [in winter] because there's no product to sell other than the things that we can cobble together. It might seem counterintuitive, but the more product we have in the storefront, the more of everything we're going to sell...In fact, bringing in something that might be perceived as competitive or not local will actually stimulate local sales.



Strategy 2

Capitalize on the demand for creative holiday-specific items, like wreaths for Christmas and flowers for Mother's Day.



STUDY INFORMATION

This report presents research findings from a comparative case study of four Collaborative Aggregation and Marketing Models: Local Harvest, a cooperative non-profit, farmer-owned, and certified organic CSA, Three River Farmers Alliance, an online food hub and regional distributor, Vernon Family Farm Store, an on-farm, year-round store that aggregates from local farms, and Fresh Start Farms, a food hub, farmers' market, and CSA operated by the nonprofit Organization for Refugee and Immigrant Success.

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