

# Farming goes hi-tech to remain sustainable

By Sheila McMillan  
Staff Writer

FARMINGTON — In the ongoing effort to keep farmers in business, a new way of marketing their products is in the works.

Western Mountains Alliance (WMA) has received funding to pilot an online farmer's market that would serve Farmington and Skowhegan.

Tricia Cook, Program Assistant for WMA, is using a similar project found online as a model to build a website for Farmington and Skowhegan farmers.

"This is all about promoting local farms, buying produce locally and making shopping for healthy foods more convenient in this hectic life we live now," Cook said.

WMA received a grant from Northeast SARE (Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education) to do the website and now Cook is in the process of putting the rest of the pieces together.

Two informal meetings have been set for public input from both local farmers and the people that would be interested in purchasing their products online.

The dates for those are Tuesday, October 21, 4 p.m. to 6 p.m. at the Olsen Student center at UMF and Wednesday, October 22, 8 a.m. to 10 a.m. at Room A of the Skowhegan Community Center.

"These will be our real first official event to introduce the idea," Cook said. "Up to this point we've been talking to farmers informally at farmer's markets in Farmington and Skowhegan, plus any farmers that we happen to know," Cook said. "Right now we're just focusing on those two areas because they'll be our test areas."

"Farmers are definitely open to the idea," Cook said. "They are beginning to understand the strength of the internet and it's

potential for growth of consumer sales. They know it's a new market."

Cook said their goal at this point is to get about 10 farmers from each area in order to begin. She will set up the website and farmers will submit a list of available produce. Cook will put it on the website and then e-mail, the same day, people (buyers) that are on another list to let them know they can order now.

"Then the website will close and I will tally everybody's order up and let the farmers know what's been ordered," Cook said.

"This part hasn't been worked out yet, but we will have a distribution center and still to be worked out is how the produce will be delivered," Cook said. "We might ask the farmers to deliver their goods to the distribution center or maybe we'll have someone go around and collect it from the farms."

Cook said that clients will have the chance to order from as many of the farms as they wish and volunteers will put their packages together at the distribution center and customers will pick up their orders there.

"It would be nice if the distribution center can be at a store so people can purchase an item or two there while picking up their packages," Cook said. "That too would help support our local economy."

"Obviously this is a move to support our farmers, but we're also looking at the customers," Cook said. "Many of us want to eat healthy but we can't get to a farmer's market because we're at work. For working people convenience is key. We are always on the go. We never have enough time, but we want to make healthy choices. So this way we have the convenience plus we're supporting our farmers."

Cook said the eventual goal is that, after she gets the operation

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up and running, some entrepreneur will take the incubated project and take it on as a business of their own.

Her more immediate goal is to have the site up and running by early spring starting with nonperishables like maple syrup, honey, home canned vegetables and homemade jellies and jams.

"That will get us started so people can become aware of the site as we move into the growing season."

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