

INCUBATOR FARM SUMMARY

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Wanted: Beginning Farmers

With the average age of Missoula County's producers at 57—up from 49 in 1982—we need beginning farmers and ranchers. But we don't need just any crop of young producers. Agriculture is a tough business, and the situation demands that the next generation of farmers and ranchers know how to produce and market food, as well as balance the books and manage a viable business. Who will be the next generation of farmers and ranchers? Where will they gain the prerequisite experience, knowledge and skills?

Incubator Farms: the concept

One strategy to help educate aspiring producers and establish their businesses is an incubator farm. The basic concept is that the program hosts and trains farmers as they grow food, share equipment, establish their markets, and learn from their mistakes, successes and fellow producers. Then, once their businesses are viable, they spin off of the incubator farm and find their own land.

Intervale Center: a snapshot

The Intervale Center's main objective is to create a more closed-loop food system for Chittenden County, VT.¹ Their main strategy: viable business models. The incubator program at the Intervale started in 1994 to help farmers build track records, implement business plans, gain a good sense of the market and what their farming skill set is, before they venture off and have their own farms. These are important skills to running a farm successfully, but also help farmers approach banks for loans when they need the capital to start anew on their own land. Plus, it creates a community of support while they are developing their enterprise.

Today, thirteen farm businesses are cultivating a total of 115 acres at the Intervale. There are 3 phases in the incubator farm program: incubator (1-3 years), enterprise (3-5 years), and mentor (5+ years). The Center covers 20% of the fees (leasing land, equipment, and greenhouse/cooler space, utilities and water costs) for the farmers in the incubator phase, just to give them a little leg up. Incubators are on a yearly lease of land and review their operation as a business with Intervale staff. After 3 years, they can continue farming and sharing resources as an enterprise farmer. Enterprise farmers pay 100% of the fees, as they have proven track record, and are extended to a 2-year lease.

¹ Most information is taken from conversations with Lindsey Ketchel, program Director of the Intervale Center. Also, see: <http://intervale.org/>.

By the fifth year, farmers are usually itching to find their own land and retain all of their sweat equity. Still, some stay longer and become mentor farms to help the incubators.

Other examples

To illustrate the range of how other incubator farm programs have taken shape, below are a few more examples:

The **Agriculture and Land-Based Training Association**, located in the Salinas Valley, CA starts their incubator program with a 6-month intensive training on sustainable production methods, taught in Spanish. Then, the aspiring farmers begin on a 1/2 acre, and ALBA teaches various local marketing approaches.²

The **UC Farm Incubator Project** has established two incubator farms. In Fresno County, it has tried to address the abundance of small farms with limited resources by developing a 20-acre incubator farm. Participants farm one to three acres and receive technical training during a two-year program. The programs are presented in various languages, including Hmong and Lao. The Center also serves as a one-stop-shop where farmers can attend computer classes and get information about loans and recordkeeping.³ In Humboldt County, on eight acres of prime farmland, eight one-acre subleases were created for new growers to test their ideas for crops, since it is very difficult to find small parcels to rent.⁴

The **New American Sustainable Agriculture Project** (NASAP) has established two incubator farms in Maine to help immigrant farmers learn how to apply their existing farming skills to a new climate and to develop small businesses. The first incubator farm was on five acres in Lewiston, Maine. Initially, 16 families farmed on small cooperative plots and shared a larger plot for experimental farm trials. With its ten current farmers – half Somali and half Latino – the site was reconfigured into an enterprise model, allowing farmers to use larger individual plots to generate more income. The second farm was developed in Westbrook. Approximately 40 farmers currently participate in NASAP, about half of whom hope to start farming businesses on their own land.⁵

Still, similar models exist—such as: **Raft Swamp Farms** in Hoke County, NC, which follows Intervale’s example;⁶ the **South Side Community Land Trust’s** Farm Business Incubator program in Cranston, RI;⁷ and there are probably others that did not turn up in a quick Google search.

² <http://www.albafarmers.org/>

³ “Small Farm Incubator Project Helps Fresno County Farmers.” 2003. *University of California Delivers*. <http://ucanr.org/delivers/impactview.cfm?impactnum=87>

⁴ “Farm Incubator Project in Humboldt County.” 2005. *University of California Delivers*. <http://ucanr.org/delivers/impactview.cfm?impactnum=45>

⁵ “USDA Community Food Project Grantee Organization Profile.” 2003. *Food Security Learning Center*. http://www.worldhungeryear.org/cfp/cfp_display.asp?ria_ndx=508

⁶ <http://www.raftswampfarms.org/>

⁷ <http://www.southsideclt.org/urban/incubator.php>