



Food Bank Farm 2.0 Community Engagement Project Feasibility Study

January 2021

Introduction

In 2019, with support from the Kestrel Land Trust, The Food Bank of Western Massachusetts (hereafter The Food Bank) purchased a 142--acre-farm-in Hadley, MA. Of the 59 tillable acres, The Food Bank wishes to devote initially 3 acres to a no-till farm dedicated to community engagement. This feasibility study focuses on the 3-acre no-till community engagement farm.

This feasibility study has multiple aims. The **first** is to identify the different **farm model options**, including their core practices, and local farms which are exemplary of these models. The **second** is to identify **required infrastructure, farming layout, potential partnerships, and employment needs**. The **third** is to establish a **development timeline** of the 3-acre community engagement farm. This feasibility study will guide the final selection of the farm model best suited for The Food Bank and the subsequent business planning phase to operationalize the farm model selection.

In the spirit of professional development, this feasibility study was prepared by Amanda Reynolds, Senior Community Engagement Coordinator, and Benee Hershon, Sustainable Agriculture and Community Engagement Coordinator/TerraCorps Member, with support from Catherine Sands, Fertile Ground consultant.

The Food Bank would like to acknowledge the financial support of the Lydia Stokes Foundation, which made this feasibility study possible.

Background

The Food Bank is the clearinghouse for emergency food in the four counties of western Massachusetts, providing food assistance to more than 89,000 individuals monthly prior to the COVID-19 pandemic and to an average 115,000 monthly at the height of the pandemic. The mission of The Food Bank is to “feed our neighbors in need and lead the community to end hunger.” It is a member of Feeding America, the national network of 200 food banks. The Food Bank was the first food bank in the country to own its first farm in 1992. Since then, 18 food banks nationally now have either a farm or vegetable gardens.

In the spring of 2020, The Food Bank purchased a second [Food Bank Farm](#) also in Hadley, Massachusetts with the assistance of the Kestrel Land Trust and an array of public and private funders listed later in this feasibility study. The funding linchpin to purchase the farm was the H.P. Kendall Foundation whose philanthropic priority is local farm-to-school programs. This funding dictated the primary Food Bank Farm model adopted to provide healthy local food at scale to a targeted population at significant risk of hunger and food insecurity: children in the city of Springfield where one in four children live in poverty.

At the same time, The Food Bank understands the existence of a vast web of underlying causes of hunger that also must be addressed to end hunger. Two prominent causes are systemic racism and economic inequality (both income and wealth). Before it purchased the farm, The Food Bank also made the decision to set aside a three-acre portion to experiment with a community engagement farm to learn how it can leverage this asset to advance the second part of its mission.

By creating a 3-acre community engagement farm, The Food Bank will not only provide additional fresh healthy organic produce to local households at risk of hunger, but also engage local school groups, volunteers, and community organizations to volunteer on the farm to support its operations as well as learn about the value of no-till farming, the importance of the local farm economy, and food security. Once the farm model is selected, The Food Bank will seek to partner with people of color and community organizations led by people of color who wish to farm, ultimately own, and operate their own farmland and grow culturally appropriate food for their communities and the local farm market in general.

Recommendations

Hybrid Sustainable Community Engagement Farm Model

Following a four-month feasibility study and research process, The Food Bank Farm staff has selected a hybrid farm model as the most appropriate path to advance the mission of The Food Bank. This farm model integrates elements from all the other models researched in this study: the Regenerative, Educational, New Entry, and Specialized Crop models.

Integrating the Regenerative model, the Food Bank Farm will implement sustainable practices in farm row development, crop production, soil health, and farm ecology. The Food Bank Farm will implement sustainable practices such as no-till and cover crops practices as well

as planting native pollinator gardens to attract native species to serve as a riparian buffer to bordering wetlands. In addition to sustainable practices, The Food Bank Farm will adopt permaculture principles in farming practices that protect the entire ecological system of the farm and surrounding community.

Integrating the Educational model, the Food Bank Farm will create Farm-to-School partnerships, The Food Bank Farm will provide fresh produce to high-poverty local schools and will host on-site educational programs for students. The Food Bank Farm will host volunteer shifts for school children during the school year after school and on weekends as well as a summer volunteer program. Additionally, The Food Bank Farm will partner with relevant organizations to host workshops and training opportunities for community members, relating to farming and our local food system.

Integrating the New Entry model, the Food Bank Farm will create opportunities for new entry and Black, Indigenous and other People of Color (BIPOC) farmers to learn how to farm using sustainable no-till practices and gain access to farmland to grow vegetables. The Farm will also host internships in partnership with the UMass Stockbridge School of Agriculture. Additionally, integrating the Specialized Crop model, the Food Bank Farm will grow culturally relevant crops that are representative of the needs of the communities which The Food Bank serves.

Lastly, the Food Bank Farm will be an accessible farm, by utilizing multi-lingual signage, wheelchair accessible garden beds and walkways, and opportunities for community members without personal transportation to visit the farm. The Food Bank Farm will create an equitable and inclusive space, requiring diversity learning for all farm staff and volunteers. The Food Bank Farm will strive to create meaningful connections with local farms and organizations that engage in solidarity work.

Projected Farm Timeline

Year 1 (2021)

February: Complete a feasibility study and business plan.

Early March: Interview summer interns, Hire additional full-time farm staff for first season of production.

March/April: Break ground and develop ½ acre plot (Prepare farm rows), Develop composting system, Develop signage and infrastructure (barn, parking, etc.).

April 2021/May: Plant ½ acre plot.

June 2021-August: Host first farm interns, create 2 TerraCorps opportunities (1 focused on agriculture, 1 focused on community engagement/education and events). Prepare hoop houses for production.

September 2021-October: Harvest first farm crops, extend season as late as possible in hoop house beds.

October 2021-December: ½ acre winter clean up, develop farm rows for entire first acre, host volunteer build for wheelchair accessible raised garden beds.

Year 2 (2022):

Off Season: Develop educational and volunteer programming, recruit summer farm staff and additional permanent farm staff (if needed).

During season: Develop and maintain 1-acre plot, host first on-farm workshop opportunity (Spring 2022), expand volunteer programs (Summer Farm Crew), expand internship opportunities, host volunteer planting day for educational pollinator garden (Spring 2022).

End of season: Begin preparing new rows, expand to 1 ½ acres.

Year 3-5 (2023-2025):

Expand to 2 acres in production, create leasing opportunity for a BIPOC farmer, host additional farm workshops and events. The Food Bank Farm will receive an Organic Agriculture Certification and Food Justice Certification, which upholds fair labor standards for farm organizations.

Year 5-6 (2025-2026):

Develop a training program in partnership with a farm organization (i.e., The Farm School), where The Food Bank sponsors one local high school graduate to learn farming skills and then work on The Food Bank Farm. Expand to a full 3 acres in production.

Promoting Black, Indigenous and other People of Color Farmers and Farmland Ownership

In the summer of 2020, following a series of brutal police events and the deaths of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and Ahmaud Arbery, The Food Bank released a statement in support of Black Lives Matter and in recognition that systemic racism and hunger are inter-related. As a community engagement farm, The Food Bank recognizes the deep history of racism in American agriculture and that racism is still active in our national and regional food system today. The impact of systemic racism is widely evident from the lack of access to fresh local produce by Black, Indigenous and other People of Color (BIPOC) communities to barriers confronted by BIPOC farmers to farmland access and ownership. A USDA analysis that examined trends in food insecurity from 2001 to 2016 found that food insecurity rates for non-Hispanic Black and Hispanic households were twice that of non-Hispanic white households.¹ Moreover, 98.8% farms in America are owned by white farmers with only 0.2% of Latinx and 0.5% Black farm owners.²

The Food Bank Farm can create food and farmland access opportunities for BIPOC and “new entry” farmers on its three-acre community engagement farm. As it gains experience, The Food Bank can develop a plan to expand farming opportunities for them on the larger Food Bank Farm currently farmed by two established and well-respected local white farmers. This transition plan will have to be designed and implemented carefully to respect all parties and uphold The Food Bank’s goal of optimal impact of its two-fold mission.

MA Local Food Perspectives, an update to the Massachusetts Local Food Systems Plan states access to affordable land is a core challenge for all farmers. Regulations and policies for farmland, water protection, and zoning are failing to protect enough farmland for Massachusetts

¹ Odoms-Young, A., & Bruce, M. A. (2018). Examining the Impact of Structural Racism on Food Insecurity: Implications for Addressing Racial/Ethnic Disparities. *Family & community health, 41 Suppl 2 Suppl, Food Insecurity and Obesity*. S3–S6. Retrieved From: <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5823283/>

² Northeast Farmers of Color Land Trust. Retrieved From: <https://nefoilandtrust.org/>

producers. In addition to not protecting enough farmland, regulation and policy are not creating enough land access for BIPOC, young and new entry producers.³ The Justice For Black Farmers Act was recently introduced in the U.S. Senate, addressing the history of discrimination in federal agricultural policy, USDA programs, and to encourage a new generation of black farmers.⁴ Although the bill has not been passed into law yet, it is clear that equal land access is a current policy priority for black farmers. The Food Bank has a history of supporting land access initiatives with its first Food Bank Farm and can further advance these goals for new entry and BIPOC farmers.

The Food Bank Farm also recognizes the connection between climate justice and racial equity. BIPOC communities are more likely to suffer from asthma and upper respiratory diseases from air pollution due to transportation, industrial facilities, and waste sites located in urban centers. Furthermore, BIPOC communities are more likely to be impacted by climate change.⁵ The Food Bank Farm will follow sustainable farming techniques to capture carbon and actively work to mitigate climate change.

Amanda and Benee attended a **Soul Fire Farm** training on Uprooting Racism in the Food System. As part of their education during this powerful training, they learned in order to be on the front lines of dismantling racism in the food system, equity must be woven into the Food Bank as an organization through decision making, power, and accountability, budget and finances, accessibility, culture, programs, and movement building. **Soul Fire Farm** provided concrete examples for The Food Bank to continue to be a powerful ally in this movement. The more anti-racist work The Food Bank as whole organization actively addresses through clear communication, intentional actions, areas of growth, and trainings, the more of a success The Food Bank Farm will be.

Through conversations with potential community partners, feedback from one farm was received on the initial decision to hire two white successful farmers for the leased portion of the farmland. Some organizations in the community were disappointed with this decision when farmers of color are struggling to find land access. Established farmers such as Gideon Porth and Joe Czajkowski have access to large farmworker crews, machinery, and already have farm properties in the area.

The Food Bank Farm has the potential to be a model farm in sustainability, inclusivity, and equity during such a pivotal moment. A list of critical recommendations to facilitate racial equity, climate justice, and inclusivity at The Food Bank Farm is based on discoveries of other successful organizations and ideas sculpted by **Soul Fire Farm's** training.

³ Massachusetts Food System Collaborative (2020). Massachusetts' Local Food System: Perspectives on Resilience and Recovery. P.19-23. Retrieved From: <https://mafoodsystem.org/media/projects/pdfs/MALocalFoodPerspectives.pdf>

⁴ Liss, Emily (2020). Policy Update: Sens. Booker, Warren, and Gillibrand release Justice for Black Farmers Act. Retrieved From: <https://farmland.org/policy-update-sens-booker-warren-and-gillibrand-release-justice-for-black-farmers-act/>

⁵ Gardiner, Beth (2020). Unequal Impact: The Deep Links Between Racism and Climate Change. Retrieved From: <https://e360.yale.edu/features/unequal-impact-the-deep-links-between-inequality-and-climate-change>