

The struggle to keep a family farm alive sometimes can seem like a lonely effort for small farmers in Maine. Family farmers don't have the marketing muscle of multinational corporate agribusinesses. They don't enjoy the same economies of scale as larger out-of-state competitors. And they may not have the time or resources to learn about the grants or financial incentives for which they qualify.

[As the family farmer who won the lottery said when asked what he was going to do with his winnings, "Keep farming until it's all gone."](#)

Fortunately, Maine farmers don't have to pin their hopes on the lottery in order to sustain their businesses. A strong and coordinated network of economic development agencies is reaching out across the state to ensure that farming families are aware of the resources that exist to support their efforts. An Aroostook County organic farm knows first-hand what a difference that support can make.

Jim and Megan Gerritsen own Wood Prairie Farm, in Bridgewater, Maine, a small community of 612 people, located along Route 1, 22 miles north of Houlton. Located a little more than three miles out of town, Wood Prairie Farm produces organic vegetable seeds, certified seed potatoes and organic gardening gifts. The farm's modest scale allows it to focus on producing high quality organic goods for its customers.

Those customers have increasingly been coming from farther away – in fact, from all 50 states – as the Gerritsen's obtained a grant with the help of Maine MEP that enabled them to print a mail order catalogue for customers.

The grant which Wood Prairie Farm received came from the Small Manufacturing Industry Effectiveness Program (SMIEP) of the Northern Maine Development Commission (NMDC). The grants are provided to qualifying businesses within the NMDC service area and can provide as much as 50 percent of a proposed project's cost. Maine MEP Project Manager Brian Sutherland, who is located at the NMDC Caribou office and coordinates projects between the two economic development agencies, assisted the Gerritsen's with their grant application.

Gerritsen praised the Maine MEP project manager for helping them secure the grant.

"Being in northern Maine, there are a lot of disadvantages: long winters, struggles with shipping and other realities that challenge us in Aroostook County. But organizations like Northern Maine Development Commission and Maine MEP help promote good business development. Without people like Brian who have a passion and mission to keep business growing, we would be lost up in northern Maine," Gerritsen said.

Sutherland praised the collaboration between northern Maine economic development agencies that resulted in grant funding for Wood Prairie Farm.

"This grant process typifies the way in which Maine's network of economic development agencies partner with one another. The grant in this case came from NMDC. The Gerritsen's were first informed of the availability of funds by Rod Thompson, a senior business counselor at the Small Business Development Center at NMDC. Rod put the Gerritsen's in touch with me, and I worked with them to successfully secure the grant. It truly was a team effort," Sutherland stated.

The Wood Prairie Farm project is just a small example of the kind of success that Maine's network of economic development organizations can achieve through collaboration," said Rosemary Presnar, Maine MEP's director of operations. She pointed to the recently-announced industry initiative by the Maine Food Producers Alliance as another example of the kind of

collaborative venture that can make a difference for Maine farmers and small food producers. That \$1.1 million cluster initiative will strengthen Maine's small food producers and processors through collaborative marketing and distribution efforts.

"Maine MEP offers a wide range of services to help manufacturers streamline their processes, reduce costs, adopt cutting-edge technologies and compete in the global marketplace. But we also collaborate closely with dozens of other state and national agencies and nonprofit organizations to support Maine's small business community. Our project managers know what's available for resources and how to help companies access them. Maine's a small state. The only way we can succeed in these tough economic times is by collaborating effectively and helping every Maine business owner find the solution to their challenges," said Presnar.