

# An Update on the Vermont Farm Disaster Relief Fund

April 2012

## What We've Been Able to Accomplish To-Date

More than six months after Tropical Storm Irene surged through Vermont, there's no question that it had a tremendous impact on Vermont's farmers. The USDA estimates that 476 farms in Vermont sustained losses as a result of the storm; many of the farmers tending these farms lost everything from crops and infrastructure to land that was washed away by overflowing rivers and creeks. The Vermont Farm Disaster Relief Fund was established by the Vermont Agency of Agriculture working with the Community Foundation to help these farmers cope with the losses and get back on their feet. As of this writing, total contributions to the fund exceeded \$2.44 million.



Grants from the fund are awarded by a committee that includes representatives from the Vermont Agency of Agriculture, the Vermont Community Foundation, the Northeast Organic Farming Association of Vermont (NOFA-VT), the Vermont Farm Bureau, Rutland Area Farm and Food Link, and the University of Vermont Extension. The committee has received 237 applications and has made grants to 198 farmers totaling \$1,879,193, with an average grant size of just over \$7,900. (These figures include some farmers who received multiple grants.)

## Farmers Are Still Encouraged to Apply

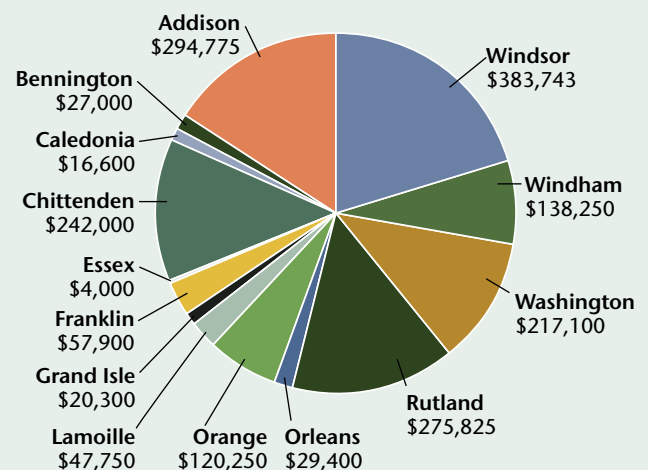
From the start, one of the committee's priorities was to let affected farmers know about the available grants. Outreach efforts were undertaken by committee members working with the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Vermont agricultural service providers, and the media. Although the total volume of inquiries from farmers seeking assistance has waned, the grants committee still receives occasional calls from farmers who have just learned about the grants. The committee continues to seek out farms that sustained losses from the storm and have not yet applied to the fund. If you know of such a farm, you are encouraged to contact the Foundation to discuss their situation.

Farmers who have applied for a grant have typically underestimated their losses. Often, it's only after the committee is able to speak to them directly that farmers talk in greater depth and detail about their situation and what they're seeing and hearing from their neighbors.

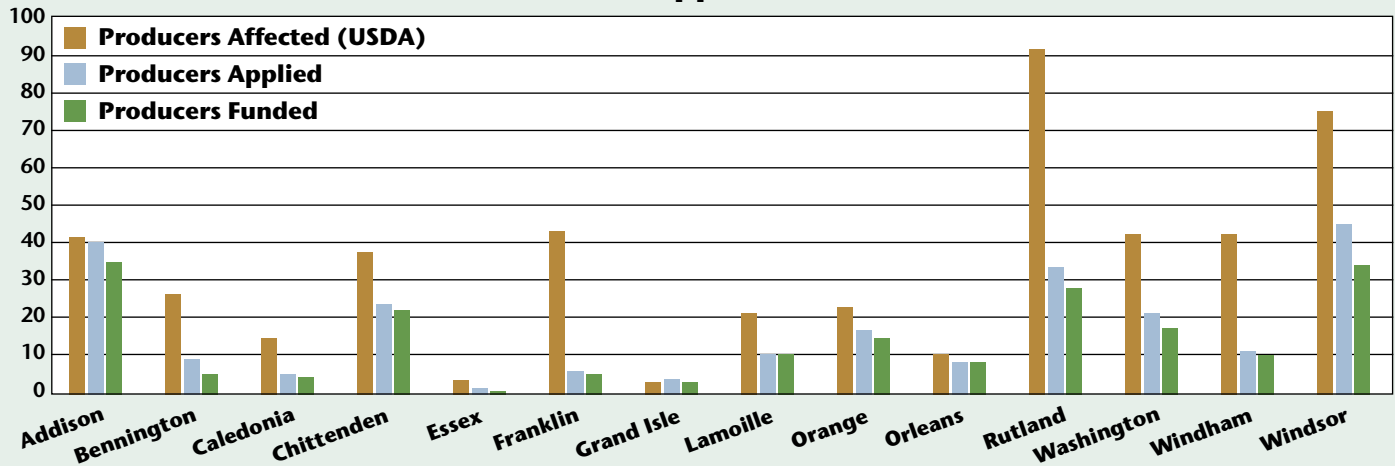
Along those same lines, there are many farmers—including those from some of the hardest hit areas—who know about the available grants but who have chosen not to apply. There may be multiple reasons for such a decision; some farmers may not yet realize how much they've lost; others may not meet the fund's income requirements (farms must have gross sales of at least \$20,000

in a calendar year or demonstrate potential for growth to be eligible); some assume that other farmers are worse off. The committee continues to work with its partners to reach these farmers and encourage all those who are eligible for assistance to apply to the fund.

## Grant Awards by County



## Most Farmers Who Have Applied Have Received A Grant



In the course of this work, the committee has had the opportunity to see firsthand the devastation wrought by the storm on individual farmers, and the tenacity and closeness of the farming community. Many farmers lent out their equipment to help harvest what was possible; neighbors donated feed in whatever amount they could; and CSA members showed up to help with cleanup. The committee heard stories from farmers who were just starting out, long-time farmers who were working mightily to save their family farm, and farmers who had been getting ready for retirement but whose plans were suddenly in doubt. Each expressed tremendous gratitude for the generosity of those who contributed and for what the fund was able to make available to them. For many, the grant they received really did provide a lifeline.

### Emerging Needs

Farmers are beginning to get a better sense of what they really lost. The biggest emerging need is feed. It's a concern that has been mounting for many farmers since the spring of 2011, when seeding and first hay cuts came later for some because of an already wet season. The storm amplified the problem by destroying stored hay and making it impossible to get second and third cuts. Much of the corn and hay that was harvested for silage is too contaminated with silt to be usable.

The fund's committee had anticipated that there would be needs that emerged after the cleanup and held some funding in abeyance so that it could address these needs. In response to feed issues, the fund launched a new grant round in late January focused on helping farmers pay for replacement feed. The committee is also working with the Agency of Agriculture to identify available high-quality feed around the state available for donation or purchase.

There will be other needs as well. The spring has brought new challenges to farmers who are looking for help to responsibly repair stream banks and fields eroded by the storm. Farmers who lost income because of flooded crops will need startup money this spring to get their crops planted this year. The committee will be monitoring these issues closely to see how we can best help farmers in need.

### Longer-Term Challenges and Opportunities

Time will tell if Tropical Storm Irene was an isolated incident or a sign of a more lasting change in weather patterns. If Vermont experiences more frequent flooding, the state and the farming community will need to begin to look at new best practices for farming in Vermont. NOFA-VT dedicated part of its winter conference to this issue. Researchers at the University of Vermont are developing better stream buffers and crafting new policies for testing contamination in flooded crops. We know of at least one farmer who is experimenting with growing rice. Support that allows farmers, nonprofits, and researchers to explore these possible solutions and provides farmers with access to technical assistance, financial planning, and flexible capital will be important.

In spite of all the challenges caused by Tropical Storm Irene, not one farmer we have talked to has said they are giving up. There is so much that is vital and promising about Vermont agriculture. Irene has brought the work of local groups supporting regional agriculture closer together; Vermonters now have an opportunity to build on this coordination and ensure that farmers have an easier path to follow to reach their potential. There has never been a better or more critical time to support Vermont agriculture. Thank you for your contributions.

To learn more about the Vermont Farm Disaster Relief Fund and other Irene-related funds, and to read about farmers who have received grants, visit [vtfloodresponse.org](http://vtfloodresponse.org). You can also contact the Foundation's Ryan Torres at 802-388-3355, ext. 289.