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Big Ideas: Hardwick farmer Andrew Meyer reinvents Vermont agriculture

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HARDWICK -- On a frigid Monday morning in mid-March, agricultural entrepreneur Andrew Meyer was worried about the \$6-a-pop price of shipping pallets.

He was also collecting sales reports, juggling production schedules, answering 57 e-mails and talking to potential customers of his fledgling wood-finish business.

And what else? Oh, yes: "In the bigger picture, I'm trying to define the future of Vermont agriculture," he said.

In the future of Andrew Meyer's dreams, more farms -- not fewer -- dot the hillsides of the Northeast Kingdom. Farmers still sell milk, but have diversified to earn a more stable income, less whipsawed by the rise and fall of milk prices.

Entrepreneurs thrive, selling new products using local ingredients from those diversified farms. Other small businesses follow, turning the waste from one production line into the raw material of another.

"We can create markets for each other. We can make money from each other's waste," Meyer said. "This is how Vermont can define itself and maybe create thousands of jobs in the agricultural sector. And Hardwick can become a hub."

Some people call it a dream. Meyer calls it "systems thinking" and he is out to show it's more than a dream.

He has taken the first steps toward demonstrating how a system of sustainable agriculture and value-added businesses could work in the hills around Hardwick, a down-at-the-heels town of 3,000 people about 25 miles north of Montpelier.

The 37-year-old former aide to then-Rep. Jim Jeffords launched two businesses last year in the industrial park at the edge of town. On one side of a dividing wall, Meyer and partner Todd Pinkham make fresh, organic soy milk and tofu using as many Vermont-grown beans as they can buy.

On the other side, Meyer's Vermont Natural Coatings company manufactures an entirely new product, a nearly odorless, "green," water-based polyurethane invented at the University of Vermont. It is based on highly purified whey, a byproduct of cheesemaking.

Simultaneously, Meyer has founded a nonprofit group, the Center for a Biobased Economy. The center is developing plans for a Hardwick "town agricultural green" -- land for incubator farms and a farmers market, along the lines of Burlington's Intervale Center.

He is one of those working to move the Vermont Food Venture Center -- an incubator for food processing businesses -- from Fairfax to Hardwick.

Finally, Meyer and two fellow entrepreneurs have hired a part-time manager to push their plans for an "agro-eco-industrial park" in Hardwick to provide space for growing farm-related businesses to share facilities, energy and vision.

There are plenty of stumbling blocks and challenges ahead, from solving soybean supply problems to finding customers in two fiercely competitive markets.

David Lane, deputy commissioner of agriculture, said Meyer and his colleagues offer a model of ways in which Vermont can grow its agricultural economy.

"In any sector of the economy, the most efficient piece of the puzzle is the entrepreneur. You can find land and money and ideas, but the people are the most critical piece," he said.

"The agricultural economy has the potential to grow more than it has in past decades. Andy has recognized that and is building on it," he said.

The farmer wears a suit

Meyer often is described as a family farmer from Hardwick, a label that is accurate but incomplete.

He grew up milking cows on the family's Bridgeman Hill dairy farm and still fills in with the 65-cow organic herd when his two younger brothers are on vacation.

His grandfather Hugo was a well-to-do New Jersey businessman who acquired thousands of acres in central Vermont. Andrew's father, Stephen, graduated from Stanford and was a schoolteacher before taking up farming. Andrew Meyer has an environmental studies degree from UVM and worked 10 years on farm and environmental policy, first for Jeffords and later as a private lobbyist.

"Andrew understands legislation. He's got great political connections and he makes sure we are part of strategic conversations in the political world. He's a great communicator. Plus he's got more suits than the rest of us," said Tom Stearns, founder of High Mowing Organic Seeds in Wolcott and one of Meyer's collaborators on the eco-park concept.

Meyer, a boyish-looking father of two, tends more to khakis and a barn jacket than a suit and tie. He talks about big ideas, but pays the kind of attention to detail that has brought the Meyers' North Hardwick Dairy four consecutive top awards for milk quality from the Vermont Dairy Industry Association.

A better wood finish

Sit down with Meyer in his conference room -- a folding cardtable on the wood-finish production floor -- and he'll want to talk about his passion for sustainable farms and his big ideas.

Beneath the surface lurks a more practical businessman.

"The first time I met Andrew, he walked in with this armload of paper and said, 'This is our business plan and proposal for creating companies,'" Steve Patterson, executive director of the regional economic development agency, recalled recently.

"He said, 'Tell me what you think, because if the bottom line doesn't look good, I'm going to pursue other activities,'" Patterson remembered.

Meyer formed Vermont Natural Coatings in 2004 to license the whey-based wood finish process developed by University of Vermont food scientist Mingruo Guo.

Whey is the liquid left when cheese is made. In a highly purified form, whey protein has natural adhesive properties that bind the wood finish and help it adhere to floors and furniture in a hard, durable film.

Meyer and tempeh maker Todd Pinkham formed Vermont Soy, which shares the 6,000-square-foot building Meyer built in the Hardwick industrial park. Together the two companies have six full-time employees.

The first recycled-plastic containers of soy milk were shipped in April. Vermont Natural Coating's PolyWhey began shipping in November.

Both companies are still tiny -- Vermont Natural Coatings can be found in 15 stores -- but are growing steadily. Meyer predicted the wood-finish company would make a profit by year's end if growth continues at its current rate.

The challenge is to persuade contractors to give the product a try.

"There is a segment of the market that is always interested in green products. That will open some doors," said Nadav Malin, editor of Brattleboro-based Environmental Building News. "Builders and floor finishers are less interested in experimenting. When they find something they like, they tend to stay with it."

Joel Danaher, a South Burlington contractor, has used the finish on four wood flooring jobs and has been pleased with the results.

The finish is more viscous than other water-based finishes, so it requires fewer coats than others, he said. It appeals to customers who are sensitive to the compounds that regular oil-based finishes release into the air.

"It seems to do a very nice job. It flows out quite nicely, it's competitively priced and it is manufactured right here in Vermont," Danaher said. "They've got a nice niche going."

Farm-to-factory challenge

When he is not focused on his companies' bottom line, Meyer spends his time on his bigger vision, building alliances with farmers and other farm-related businesses.

Long before Vermont Soy's production line was up and running, Meyer and Pinkham began working with farmers and UVM to create a supply of Vermont-grown, food-grade organic soybeans.

Six farmers experimented with different varieties in 2007. Vermont Soy bought 12 tons of beans from them, enough to make all its tofu for a year. Additional trials are planned this year.

Beans for the company's soy milk still must be imported from Quebec and Michigan. Increasing the Vermont supply won't be easy. It's an example of the obstacles that must be surmounted by farmers eager to diversify their crops.

"The problem is not so much growing them, but how do you get them from the farm to the factory?" asked Heather Darby, a UVM agronomist working on the soybean project.

There's no middleman in Vermont, she said, to do the work of buying large lots of beans, cleaning, storing and transporting them to buyers.

On the other hand, organic soybeans can be a relatively lucrative crop -- about \$1,000 a ton, she said -- for farmers interested in growing them.

Meyer's temporary solution to the middleman problem was to ally with High Mowing Organic Seeds in Wolcott, which stores his Vermont-grown beans and cleans them in small lots. It's a good example of how agriculture-related businesses concentrated around Hardwick can support one another's growth, he said.

Meanwhile, Vermont Soy is working with farmers and other businesses on longer-term solutions for soybean cleaning and storage, he said.

Finding a Vermont source of highly purified whey is a more distant goal, he said, because his company's demand for the product is too small to justify investment in the sophisticated equipment needed.

Still, he said, the opportunity is there, and he is discussing the possibility with large cheesemakers who might be able to find multiple markets for purified whey.

20 years from now

In the even more distant future lie Meyer's hopes for a network of green businesses, converting local farm products into competitive products and building on one another's successes.

Still, he has begun. His Center for a Biobased Economy is working toward its goal of an Intervale-like farm incubator center. The all-volunteer group began with a highly visible project -- revitalizing Hardwick's community gardens. Now 20 plots stretch along the banks of the Lamoille River, their greenhouses, storage sheds and summer flowers within sight of Vermont 15, the town's main road.

"We want people to understand where their food comes from," Meyer said. "This area still has a working landscape, but it is threatened. This is about educating people about the importance of open fields, productive land."

A second, informal group is working on a new, ecologically designed industrial park and has hired a part-time employee to move the project forward, searching for land and financing. Meyer and High Mowing Seeds hope to build in the new park.

Already the nucleus of businesses such as Vermont Soy and nearby cheesemakers such as Jasper Hill Farm helped persuade the Food Venture Center to move to Hardwick when it decided to relocate, said Steve Patterson, executive director of the Northeastern Vermont Development Association, the regional planning and development agency.

"Every time I get depressed, I go over to Hardwick," he said. "I couldn't be more excited about what's happening there."

Said Meyer, "In the end, it all comes back to sustainability. If you are going to farm successfully, you can't rely on the way it's always been.

"You need companies like Vermont Natural Coatings to process agricultural products in a way

that partners with farms and agricultural businesses. If we're mutually supportive, instead of losing farms, you'll see additional farms in this part of Vermont.

"That's what I hope will be the future here. That we'll be able to say in 10, 20 years: Agriculture is established as our future."

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