

UVM hoping to seed new agriculture venture

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By Peter Hirschfeld Vermont Press Bureau

HARDWICK - The state's largest university has agreed to invest its intellectual capital in a nonprofit Hardwick organization seeking to reinvigorate the agricultural economy in this old farming region.

Dan Fogel, president of the University of Vermont, signed a Memorandum of Understanding Tuesday afternoon with the Center for an Agricultural Economy. The pact ensures that the Center, an upstart coalition of small-business owners in the Hardwick area, will have access to the laboratory resources and academic manpower at the university.

"We will shape this alliance over the next months, identifying projects and needs and resources to lead to success..." Fogel said during a signing ceremony at Vermont Soy Tuesday. "Professional time and resources will be committed by UVM, as well as a dedicated graduate student."

The Center for an Agricultural Economy was founded in 2004 by Andrew Meyer, owner of Vermont Soy, an organic soy drink and tofu company, and Vermont Natural Coatings, which produces whey-based wood varnishes.

Tom Stearns, president of the Center's board of directors, and owner of High Mowing Organic Seeds – based in nearby Wolcott – said the dozen or so agriculture-and-food based businesses that have sprouted in the region in recent years attest to the commercial viability of local agricultural products.

Continued success, he said, could help revamp a broken food system while adding new jobs to a once depressed region.

"To have so many farmers and businesses doing things in this one small corner of a rural state is incredible," Stearns said. "What we happen to have is the building blocks for something much more comprehensive."

UVM's fingerprints are already on some of the Hardwick businesses touted at Tuesday's event. Vermont Natural Coatings was first created in a laboratory at UVM. The university opted to sell the patent to a local, Vermont-based business.

"UVM offers an incredible diversity of skills and research capabilities," Stearns said. "By having all those resources, those little generous prizes of study, it can help this become comprehensive in the way it needs to be."



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Andrew Meyer of Vermont Soy and Vermont Natural Coatings, standing, introduces UVM President Dan Fogel, seated to his right, at a celebration Tuesday in Hardwick of a new partnership between UVM and the Hardwick-based Center for an Agricultural Economy.

The services offered by UVM will run the gamut, from marketing research to lab testing.

Lisa Aultmann-Hill, director of the Transportation Research Center at UVM, said things as mundane as shipping can require an enormous amount of research. Jasper Hill Farm, a Greensboro cheese company, may soon move shipping in-house. Work conducted at her division, she said, could help the business find efficiencies and improve margins.

"There is a whole systems engineering of supply-chain logistics that a small company cannot do on its own," she said.

It's those kinds of resources that will bring the Center for an Agricultural Economy to the next level, Stearns said. He said the entrepreneurs that comprise the Center have sent at least 20 possible business projects to UVM for review. Under the formalized pact, UVM will help the Center sift through the ideas to see what will work, and what won't.

"UVM is going to help us identify what opportunities there are for value-added products," Stearns said. "They help us figure out what might work."