

# Vermont's Food Hubs Achieve Organic Certification

*New Organic Regulations Met with Teamwork and Collaboration*

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A large feat in Vermont's organic food system was underway throughout the first quarter of 2024. This spring, the food hubs in Vermont became certified organic! Why is this significant, what is a food hub, and why are they important to Vermont's food landscape? Read on to learn about a truly collaborative effort and why we are all celebrating this achievement. An extended version of this article can be viewed at (*This article is a shortened version of what is posted on our website's blog.*)

Food hubs provide critical infrastructure for both producers and customers (like restaurants, stores, and universities) – by solving transportation, aggregation, storage, marketing, ordering, and fulfillment challenges that both sides otherwise face. They help small and medium-sized farmers and food entrepreneurs access larger markets by aggregating product from various producers at their facilities and offer buyers a wide array of local food through one access point. While each business model varies and some might lightly process or repackage products, as well, they all “handle” incoming and outgoing boxes, bags, jars, and pallets of food. These regional hubs are an incredibly important part of our local food supply chain!

Seven Vermont food hubs are participating in an organic certification mentorship program: Acorn Food Hub in Middlebury, Farm Connex in Hardwick, Food Connects in Brattleboro, Green Mountain Farm to School in Newport, Intervale Food Hub in Burlington, Myers Produce in Hardwick, and Vermont Farmers Food Center in Rutland. This learning cohort came together as part of the new Transition to Organic Partnership Program (TOPP), which supports transitioning and organic producers with mentorship and resources. NOFA-VT is coordinating the mentorship program in Vermont and has 20 mentees paired with experienced mentors in 2024. It was a no-brainer to form a cohort with the food hubs, led by mentor, Joe Dickson.

While previously exempt, food hubs are now required to be certified organic as handlers of organic product. The National Organic Program recently overhauled some of the organic standards, with the goal of bolstering organic integrity and addressing potential fraud at several points in the supply chain – something that organic advocates had been pushing for for years. Third party certification ensures that organic integrity is maintained from sourcing seeds, growing practices, harvesting, washing, packing, storage, labeling, transport, and more. Food hubs are doing their part to ensure that contamination and commingling are not happening while organic products are in their possession, which could be anything from the type of sanitizer being used, residue from previous non-organic products, or mistaken labeling.

Joe first convened the cohort in January with a kickoff meeting where he shared that his goal was to help demystify the process and be there every step of the way. He established a schedule for regular meetings, site visits, open office hours, communication channels for quick questions, and mock inspections. Joe, who has his own consulting business, Lot 49 Advisors, has an accomplished background in the organic sector, making him well suited to mentor in this capacity.

On the Vermont Organic Farmers (VOF) side, certification specialist Katie Birkhauser also worked directly with the food hubs. Having been a farmer herself, she loves supporting operations that keep our local food system thriving. Everyone learned a lot and it was challenging for all involved, even VOF as

the certifier, as they didn't have enough lead time or information to adjust their systems and forms to accommodate food hubs. Katie made sure they were on the right track throughout the process and ultimately issued certificates to all seven hubs.

One of the last steps in the process, the inspection is the culmination of lots of detailed work and is conducted by an inspector contracted by VOF. Sarah Costin and Clotilde Hryshko were two of the inspectors assigned several food hubs each. Both have been doing this work for years and love meeting dedicated people. Sarah said that food hubs are her new favorite operation because of what they do and Clotilde noted how positive it is to see these hubs sprinkled across the state and moving a lot of product.

The food hubs are proud of their certification and grateful for the group learning that the TOPP mentorship provided. Their mentor, Joe, shared, "I've learned at least as much as I've shared, and been deeply inspired by the work each of these organizations is doing to build a resilient regional food system in Vermont."