

## Local farmers look forward to freezing Grants helping to expand markets

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Although it was awarded a \$250,000 federal grant to help farmers around the region extend their season for selling to local schools and institutions, Franklin Community Development Corp. felt a big chill when it looked at the price tag for a 600-square-foot freezer.

That large a freezer probably would have handled the 100,000 pounds of produce the CDC expects to prepare and freeze, but it would have also taken a huge bite out of the grant's \$35,000 budget designated for the Greenfield Food Processing Center, said CDC Executive Director John Waite. In fact, the price tag would have likely been closer to \$50,000.

So instead, the center is turning to Performance Foodservice, a branch of the national Performance Food Service Group, which has excess freezer capacity at its Springfield terminal off Interstate 291.

Performance would collect bags of cut up, frozen vegetables from the Wells Street food processing center in its freezer trucks and deliver them to its storage freezers, said Waite.

By not having to equip the center with its own 600-square-foot-freezer, he said, "We can save a lot of startup costs. They'd be purchasing product from us and resell it."

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executive director Franklin  
County Community  
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The Greenfield processing center's current freezer is now limited to 10 pallets.

The CDC is still awaiting word on a \$50,000 grant for which it's been named one of 17 finalists nationally, from 400 applicants, Waite said.

Together with the \$35,000 from the federal Farm to Institution grant — and without having to spend \$50,000 for a giant freezer — that would allow the CDC to buy other items on its wish list: a vegetable chopper, blancher and shocker to blanch and then halt the steaming process with a blast of cold water before the processed vegetables can be frozen, plus a vacuum sealer to seal them in 5-pound plastic bags.

Beyond that \$50,000 worth of equipment, he said, the center could also use a centrifuge dryer to rid the blanched produce of excess water. Another long-term acquisition might be a flash freezer, at a cost of about \$150,000. It uses an individual quick-frozen (IQF) technology that would do away with the need for vacuum packaging.

Community Involved in Sustaining Agriculture last year did a study of mobile quick-freeze equipment, based on a freezer owned by the state of Vermont. But for now, such a freezer purchase will go on the back burner. Without that IQF equipment, Waite said, fruits and vegetables frozen by the center get clumped together and have to be thawed in advance of cooking, but that's OK for institutions.

Last year, the center worked on a trial basis with five farms, including Atlas Farm in Deerfield, to buy, cut up and freeze 2,000 pounds of broccoli for the Holyoke Public Schools, using the center's walk-in freezers over a matter of days. A blast freezer could freeze the same quantity of vegetables in a matter of hours.

Some Pioneer Valley schools, like Easthampton and Granby, said Waite, already contract with Chartwells dining services to do their food service and get frozen produce from Performance Foodservice, and Chartwells has expressed an interest in buying local products.

With a \$12,000 Community Foundation of Western Massachusetts grant, the CDC has hired a part-time coordinator who is working with the School to Farm Network and CISA to make arrangements with area farmers to sell produce to the Food Processing Center for the program.

The idea is to encourage farmers to plant more crops, knowing that they will be able to sell the additional produce that area schools, colleges, hospitals and other large institutions can use in frozen form. At one meeting of farmers, Waite said, a farmer reported having to plow under cauliflower last year because there wasn't enough of a market for the fresh vegetable at harvest time.

"If you can't sell it the week it's ready, you're in trouble," Waite said. "What they (farmers) love about this is they freeze it, then they can sell it four months later." The trick, he added, is "Getting it into schools at a reasonable price they can afford," but which is also profitable for local farmers.

In the case of Baystate Franklin Medical Center and some area schools the CDC has talked to, it may be able to store produce in Greenfield and find a way to deliver that directly. Some farmers who have already made connections with large institutions like colleges may prefer to continue to own their produce, even after it's frozen and stored, but many of those contacted are happy to sell it to the CDC.

"We want this to be sustainable, where we make enough money to pay our bills so that we don't need grants," said Waite. "But as we start off, we need extra capital."

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