

New microloan fund to benefit local farmers

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Saturday, January 17 BRATTLEBORO -- Through all the years that Strolling of the Heifers founder Orly Munzing has been supporting local agriculture, she has always listened to what the farmers had to say. A few years ago, she heard that farmers were not able to get the short-term loans that they sometimes need to get them through a rough stretch.

So Munzing started talking to banks, nonprofits and corporate donors. On Thursday at a special meeting, she announced the formation of the Strolling of the Heifers Microloan Fund for New England Farmers. The Strolling of the Heifers is partnering with The Carrot Project, a Massachusetts agriculture nonprofit, to provide loans of up to \$10,000 to farmers in Vermont and western Massachusetts. The pilot project is going to accept applications until Feb. 7 this year, with the hopes of extending the loans to farmers all over New England in the coming years.

"Sometimes credit is not available quickly when farmers need it," said Vermont Agriculture Secretary Roger Allbee while introducing the program to a small group of farmers who came out for the meeting. "This will allow people who need to have something done to use the money to move forward with their operation."

The fund is geared specifically to small farmers and only farms with 250 or fewer acres and an annual gross revenue of \$250,000 or less will be considered. Organic and sustainable farms that produce goods for local markets will also have preferential access to the money.

"Two years ago when I sat with farmers and asked them what else The Strolling of the Heifers can do, they all said they would like to have an easier way to borrow money," Munzing said. "It is easier for farmers in India to borrow money than it is here, and hopefully this fund will help with that."

After Munzing decided to try to get the loan program off the ground, she heard about the similar Massachusetts group, The Carrot Project, which was also just beginning to start a similar program. Carrot Project executive director Dorothy Suput said at the meeting that 25 percent of the small and medium farms that apply for short-term loans are denied, and start up farms and agriculture operations get rejected about 40 percent of the time.

Suput, who was just starting to seek the capital to open the fund in Massachusetts, said the stars aligned when Munzing contacted her about what was going on in Vermont.

"Research has shown that there is a gap for small and medium farmers to get the financing they need," Suput said. "We need a program for farmers to fill that financing gap." Suput said the fund's focus on small to medium sized farms in Vermont and western Massachusetts will allow the group to make sure the operations that truly need the capital have access to it. "Farmers are often denied because of their credit history or collateral," she said. "We will be able to have more flexibility to help them." The fund is starting with \$150,000, and Chittenden Bank will service the loans.

A portion of the loan money came from two concerts put on last year by Pete Seeger and his family. Information on the loan fund can be found at www.strollingoftheheifers.com and www.thecarrotproject.org.

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