



SUMMARY + BACKGROUND

COVID-19 exposed the precarious state of the local food economy in the Champlain Valley, and beyond. Once the statewide shutdown was announced in March 2020, Champlain Valley growers quickly lost farmers' market, restaurant and institutional business, creating uncertainty in the local ag economy and food insecurity issues. In April 2020, the Addison County Relocalization Network (ACORN) organized an online direct to consumer farmers' market with two centralized distribution points. ACORN closed the Online Market when farmers markets reopened, and the volunteer-run direct-to-consumer market proved to be unsustainable to manage.

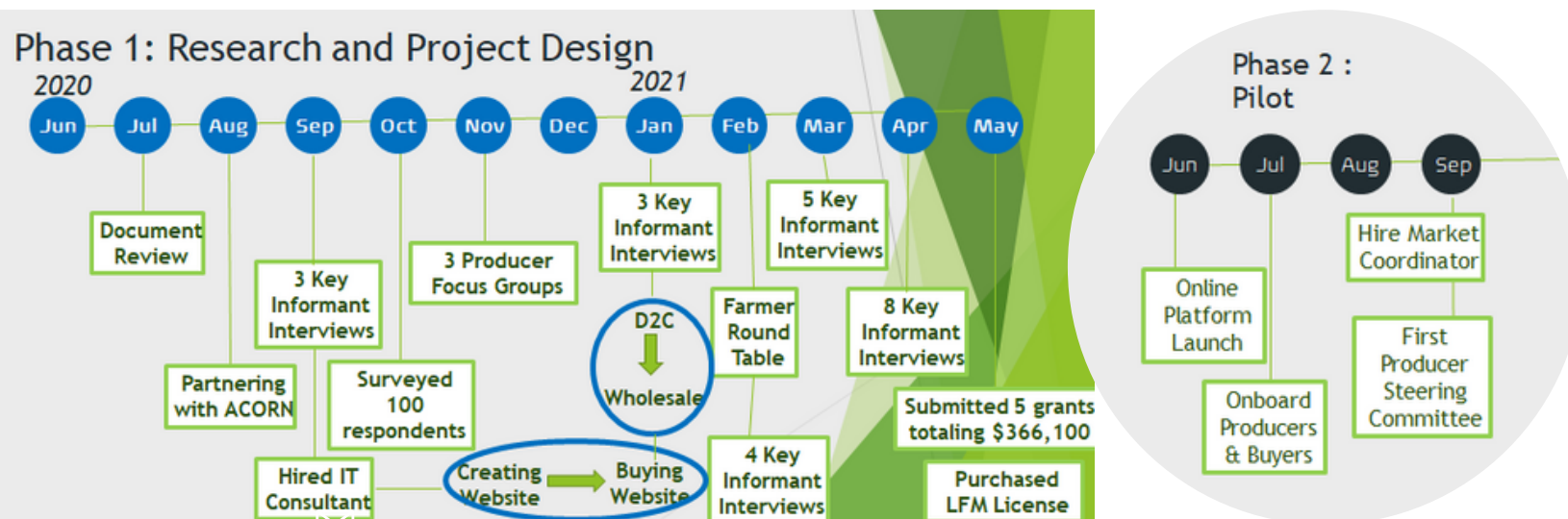
In partnership with a UNH graduate student, between August 2020 and April 2021, ACORN administered a survey to 100 community members, and held four focus groups with farmers across product categories, two consumer focus groups, and 20 key informant interviews with farmers, food hubs and wholesale buyers, to better understand the needs and challenges of the farming community in the Champlain Valley region of Vermont and to also assess the viability of an online market in our region. The research led us to shift from a direct to consumer focus to a business to business focus. After speaking with food hubs and online market managers around the state and the U.S., we also realized we didn't need to invent the wheel by creating our own software, as previously envisioned. ACORN landed on using Local Food Marketplace, an established platform currently used by food hubs across the country to facilitate the wholesale online market where products are aggregated, streamlining transactions and making it easier for producers to connect with wholesale buyers.

ONLINE WHOLESALE MARKET REPORT

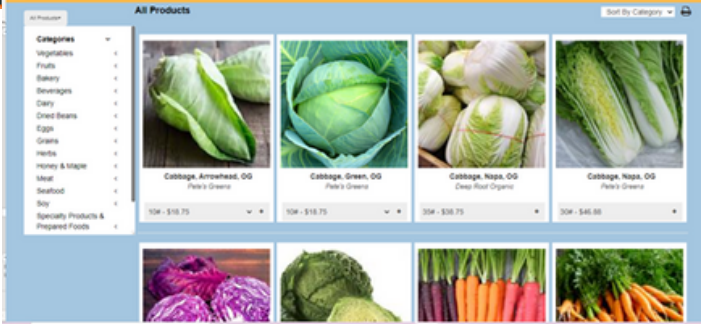
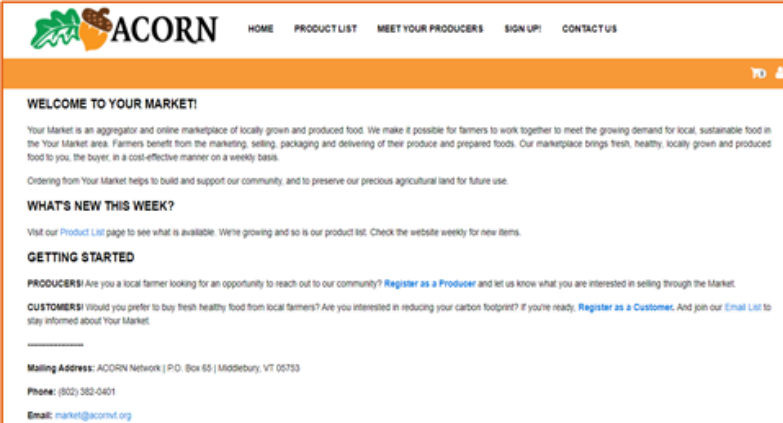
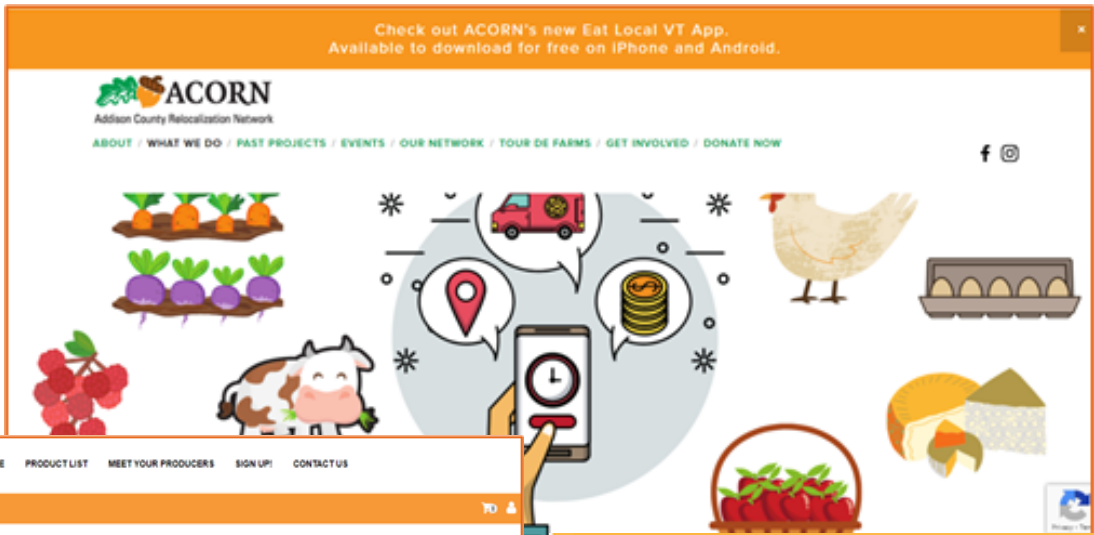
With funding from the City Market Seedling grant, we purchased a license from Local Food Marketplace and soft-launched an online wholesale web platform that aggregates local products from small and medium sized farms in the region.

The ACORN Online Wholesale Market supports producers and growers in Vermont's Champlain Valley. The project participants consist of 720 potential producers across all food categories and over 110 potential wholesale buyers. We began onboarding producers in Summer 2021 but had to postpone the onboarding as most producers were deep in the growing season. Another challenge we encountered was many producers vocalized the need for a physical food hub to aggregate and store products. Lastly, ACORN needed more capacity in terms of staff to support the online market.

The Seedling funding allowed us to pursue additional sources of funding. In October 2021, ACORN was awarded the Specialty Crop Block grant to fund a part-time Market Manager and a Sales and Marketing Manager. We are also organizing and facilitating monthly farmer steering committee meetings, and are part of an emerging Western Vermont Food Hub Network in partnership with four other food hubs. A separate grant will fund the development of a business plan and feasibility study for the physical food hub (*we are unable to publicly announce the source of this funding at this time*). This business plan will bring us one step closer to realizing the long-term dream of a centralized physical aggregation site, used in conjunction with the online wholesale market. We will also continue the development of a statewide distribution network to better collaborate and connect with other food hubs throughout Vermont.



ONLINE WHOLESALE MARKET LAUNCH



Beginning in Summer 2021, ACORN implemented the [one-stop wholesale online market](#) which included soft-launching the online market platform, [creating a landing page](#), purchasing a software license from [Local Food Marketplace](#), participating in training to learn the platform and how to onboard buyers and sellers, and creating manuals for producers and buyers. ACORN hired an Online Market Coordinator in November 2021 to oversee the operations and officially launch the online market in Winter 2021-2022.



LOCAL FOOD SYSTEM PARTNERSHIPS:

VERMONT FOOD HUB NETWORK

- ACORN has started collaborating with food hubs around the state to help improve the Vermont distribution network.

FARMER STEERING COMMITTEE

- ACORN is facilitating a monthly steering committee of local producers who are participating in the online market or interested in developing the food hub.

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

- In addition to producers, buyers and food hubs, ACORN is also partnering with regional organizations to develop the low-carbon food hub: Addison County Economic Development Corporation, Rutland County Economic Development Corporation, Addison County Regional Planning Commission, Middlebury Natural Foods Co-op, Acorn Energy Co-op and Addison County Climate Economy Action Center

INCREASING THE PURCHASING OF LOCAL FOOD

PORTER HOSPITAL

- ACORN met with the Porter Hospital Food Services Director to help streamline their local food purchasing.

MIDDLEBURY COLLEGE

- The online wholesale market will help streamline local purchasing for the College. We met with the College's Executive Director of Food Service Operations, and will continue to work with them to help assess their needs, and to onboard them as a buyer.

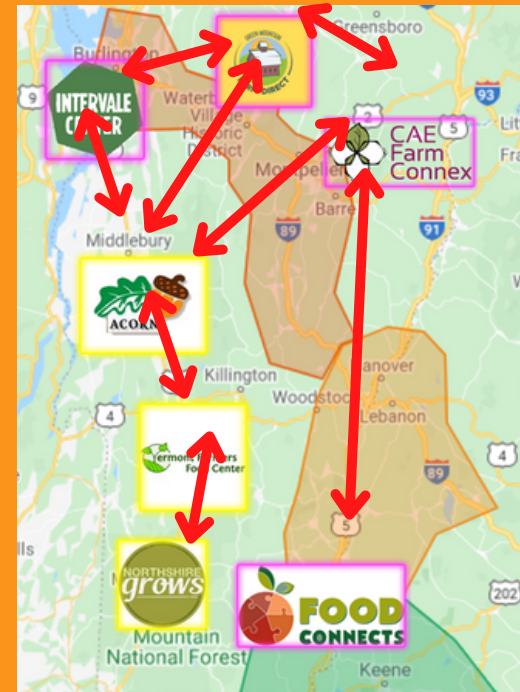
ADDISON CENTRAL SCHOOL DISTRICT

- ACORN co-wrote and was awarded a Farm to School Nutrition grant in 2021. We will be partnering with the Addison Central School District Farm to School team to create an action plan to increase local food purchasing for the district, and to increase Farm to School education.

RESTAURANTS, CATERERS + FARM STANDS

- ACORN has also met with other area wholesale buyers who are supportive of this market, and plan to use it, including caterers, chefs, and farmers who own farm stands that aggregate products.

VERMONT FOOD HUBS



LOOKING AHEAD

- ACORN received a 12 month grant in November 2021 to develop a business plan and conduct a feasibility study for a low carbon food hub in Addison County. ACORN will be developing this business plan and study in 2022.
- ACORN was one of six coalition organizations in Western Vermont and Eastern NY that were included in a Build Back Better grant for infrastructure to support supply chain logistics of agriculture and food products. If awarded, this funding would build and establish a physical food hub in Addison County by 2027. We will receive notification of the award in December 2021.
- ACORN will hire a Sales and Marketing Manager for the Online Market in 2022.



**ACORN THANKS THE CITY MARKET BOARD
AND STAFF FOR PROVIDING US WITH THE
SEEDS TO GROW THIS COMMUNITY-DRIVEN
PROJECT.**

**WE LOOK FORWARD TO CULTIVATING THE
ORCHARD THAT GROWS FROM THESE
SEEDLINGS!**