

Moon Valley Farm

MARBIDCO Certified Local Farm Enterprise Food Aggregation Grant Fund Program



Emma Jagoz, founder of Moon Valley Farm located in Woodsboro, MD, once wrote about her future ambition on her website: “No money, no experience, two tiny kids, a slice of borrowed land and a vision”.

The first-time farmer began her journey into growing food in 2012 after a thoughtful process of evaluating her values in prioritizing her family, eating healthy foods, and sharing with the community.

Today, she runs a 25-acre certified organic farm. Ms. Jagoz and her team grow specialty vegetables and herbs in Frederick County. When she was ready to take the farm to the next level, she applied for and received two MARBIDCO Certified Local Farm Enterprise Food Aggregation Grants.

The purpose of the Certified Local Farm Enterprise Food Aggregation Grant Program (Small-Scale Farmer Entity Project Grant) is to demonstrate how an investment of funds can help to grow and strengthen Maryland’s local food system and to create opportunities for small farmers to sell products to wholesale and institutional markets.

The grants - between \$25,000 and \$100,000 - are used to fund projects that help small farmers aggregate their product(s) to sell to institutional or wholesale buyers.

Applicants for the small-scale farmer-led aggregation grant must include at least four Certified Local Farm Enterprise farmers and provide at least a 20% match of private funds in the project.

Ms. Jagoz shares her experience with MARBIDCO and how its programs have helped the farm meet her vision of assuring healthy locally grown produce is available in schools and in the community:

MARBIDCO's Certified Local Farm Enterprise Food Aggregation Grant spoke to us precisely - we are a certified organic vegetable farm who works with dozens of other farmers to run a year-round, multi-farm Community-Supported Agriculture (CSA) program, to sell to restaurants in DC, Baltimore, Frederick, and Northern Virginia, and wanted to expand into selling wholesale to schools.

For us, branching out into wholesale made sense on a number of levels - it would help balance out our delivery margins from our home delivery of CSA boxes, and it would allow us to move more volume at once, which is needed when you scale up production, grow winter storage crops, and aggregate from a bunch of farms.

At Moon Valley Farm, we collaborate with several dozen other local regional farmers and producers to diversify our offerings in all seasons for our customers, and to help us specialize in crops that grow best on our respective soils.

In addition to the 40+ crops we grow by aggregating from other local farmers, we can offer hundreds of crops, making it easier for our customers to buy local in all seasons from one place.

We offer gourmet mushrooms, organic eggs, local fruit, grains, dried beans and even more vegetable varieties and quantities by working with other farms.

Wholesale customers require consistency in product availability and quality, and many including the school systems need to plan their menus several months in advance.

In a lot of ways, it's easier to grow food than it is to find a timely buyer, especially for produce growers like us who work with such short shelf life on our crops.

Adding wholesale as an enterprise made sense, but that doesn't mean it is free to start, and that's where MARBIDCO came in to help.

We received a MARBIDCO grant in 2021 to increase our capacity to sell wholesale and got started selling to the Frederick County Public Schools (FCPS) system.

With the MARBIDCO grant, we invested in a new refrigerated delivery vehicle, a new walk-in cooler, an expandable conveyor for packing efficiency and a forklift, all to allow us to grow and aggregate more volume for these larger customers such as FCPS.

We immediately loved working with FCPS, as growing for our community's elementary school children's lunches is just "feel-good" in all the ways - plus my children attend FCPS schools too.

After working with the schools in the 2021-2022 school year, we learned a lot about the logistics of the local school systems and their capacities, or lack thereof, to offer fresh and healthy produce to the kids.

In Frederick County, the schools lack the staff, the coolers, cooking equipment and the kitchen space to process any vegetables or fresh produce for the kids.

This means the school system can only really buy produce that is “ready-to-eat” - they truly cannot cut or cook produce meaningfully if at all, which you can imagine greatly limits what produce they can purchase from local farms, especially considering that the school calendar excludes the easiest months to offer fresh-off-the-vine produce.

Our local schools can buy grapes and apples, cherry tomatoes, and baby carrots - but they really can’t buy things like whole watermelons that require cutting, sweet potatoes that require cooking or celery that requires washing.

This major roadblock is why we applied for a second MARBIDCO Certified Local Farm Enterprise Food Aggregation Grant in 2022, this time to invest in a processing facility and equipment to allow us to take on the next step for the schools - washing and chopping produce to sell them a “ready-to-eat” product.

We needed this investment because farms like ours are not allowed to simply wash and process produce like that without its own facility and food safety measures in place - and now we are able to meaningfully meet the need of the schools for local produce that is delivered to them in a way they can actually use.

The grant funded equipment to wash and process the produce, including a commercial food processor that can slice, dice, make fries or carrot sticks; a vacuum sealer, stainless tables and sinks for washing and staging, a reach-in cooler, and the building to host the processing facility. We can transform our large carrots into bite sized sticks, chop watermelons into chunks, cut greens into “ready-to-eat” sizes and more.

We now realize that this investment will greatly help us on the farm to decrease our food waste as well. Moon Valley Farm grows and aggregates year-round which means we grow and buy a lot of storage crops, and as you can imagine, storage crops that have dings or bruises on them simply won’t store well.

We either have to leave imperfect produce in the field or compost it from our coolers. Because of MARBIDCO’s support, we’re able to harvest and process more of that produce which will decrease our food waste and get it to the school system to feed the children!

MARBIDCO'S grant program speaks directly to the needs of farms like Moon Valley, who want to meet the needs of Maryland's schools and institutional customers - expanding from our direct market only sales - but lacked the capital to make the investments ourselves.

MARBIDCO's Certified Local Farm Enterprise Food Aggregation Grant Fund requirement includes partnering with additional enterprise farmers, Moon Valley Farm works with:

- Sassafras Creek Farm of Southern Maryland who grows certified organic carrots, beets, tomatoes and sweet potatoes -- the carrots have been grown for and served to the FCPS school children.
- 78 Acres of Washington County, Maryland, who grows tree fruit and vines including grapes, apples, peaches and plums that we've aggregated and distributed to the schools.
- Distillery Lane Ciderworks in Jefferson, Maryland, provides Pixie Crunch apples to the schools.
- Potomac Valley Organics in Frederick County to provide organic baby kale to the schools.
- Zahkradka Farm in Baltimore County, to provide rainbow carrots to the schools.
- Nick's Organic Farm in Frederick County
- Help From Above Farm in Three Springs, PA
- Pleasant Hill Produce in Walkersville, MD
- Gorman Farms in Howard County (for certified organic strawberries),
- Chesapeake Fungi in Mount Airy, MD
- Springfield Farm in Baltimore County, MD
- Next Step Produce in Newburg, MD
- Chesapeake Queen Co in Woodsboro, MD
- Catocin Mountain Farm in Thurmont, MD, and many more.