



Pandemic Adjustment Equipment Grant Fund Recipient: Venture Manor Farm

For many farms, the Covid-19 Pandemic caused disruptions and changes to their operations. Henry Oakley and his family at Venture Manor Farms in Wicomico County lost a major revenue source when they were unable to host school field trips. This was compounded by the difficulty in finding seasonal labor during the spring produce harvest season. The unexpected turn of events led them to MARBIDCO's Pandemic Adjustment Equipment Grant Fund.

In a normal year, the farm hosts several school tours. However, since schools were shut down in the spring, field trips and other group tours to their farm were canceled. This resulted in significant financial loss. The farm also grows and sells a variety of crops and produce, including corn, soybeans, strawberries, squash, lima beans, and peppers. During the harvesting season, Oakley normally would hire 12 to 15 seasonal workers to pick produce.

However, this past year the coronavirus caused the community of workers he would normally hire to fall ill. As a result, Oakley and his three family members picked six acres of strawberry fields by themselves. It was during this time that Oakley heard about MARBIDCO's Pandemic Adjustment Equipment Grant Fund program.

"MARBIDCO was on top of answering our questions very quickly, within a day," said Oakley. "If I were getting a loan from a bank or farm credit I'd have been at their office. To do everything by email back and forth through the whole process worked out pretty good."

With the PAEGF grant, Venture Manor Farms was able to acquire two machine crop pickers as well as a sawmill log cutter for a separate farm enterprise. The crop pickers allow an individual to pick strawberries and weed the plant beds more efficiently, helping the family work through labor shortages. With the new sawmill, Oakley plans to cut timber on his farm into custom lumber cuts or prefab building kits. These then can be sold to customers who want to build their own homes or sheds.

The farm has just under 200 acres of timber. Oakley plans to selectively cut the right-sized trees on the sawmill and make “D-logs.” He then will cut the logs so that they can interlock with one another. He plans to have a variety of kit sizes available for customers to choose from when building their structures.

Oakley plans to launch a website to promote prefab kits and custom cutting services. The farm also manages three full-service markets where they sell produce, Christmas trees, bedding plants, and home décor. Looking to the future, Oakley’s son Jacob plans to continue the farming operation.

“I just thank you all, thank Dan [Sweeney] for his help and all the other people along the way,” said Oakley. “I appreciate the opportunity; you’ve all been good to work with.”