

Request for Proposal

Release Date: 6/19/2026

Response Date: 6/29/2026

PROJECT DETAILS

The Resilient Food Systems Infrastructure (RFSI) program is administered through the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) Agricultural Marketing Service (AMS). The Vermont Agency of Agriculture Food & Markets (VAAFAM) has entered into a cooperative agreement with the USDA AMS to administer this program in Vermont. The RFSI program is focused on strengthening Vermont's middle of the supply chain activities, viability and overall supply chain resilience.

Food safety programs are a central to the viability and success of middle of the supply chain operations. Effective food safety programs are: 1) required to adequately address potential food safety risks of human concern, and 2) increasingly required to access, and maintain good standing in, wholesale and regional markets. The RFSI program has identified food safety as a priority for Vermont's aggregation, storage and distribution industry. Specifically, the program identified the need to standardize understanding and capacity to operationalize food safety best practices.

The VAAFAM seeks a contractor to develop and run a series of roundtable and 1:1 educational conversations. These conversations will bring together industry and regulators to address the need to expand and standardize food safety understanding. The contractor will also create customized Action Plans for food hub participants to support effective implementation of food safety.

Agency/Department

Name: Vermont Agency of Agriculture, Food, and Markets

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TIMELINE*

RFP Timeline	Project Timeline
Release Date: 6/19/2026	Contract Start Date: 8/1/2026*
Responses Due: 6/29/2026 by 5pm	Contract End Date: 1/30/2027

**To be finalized after proposals are received and negotiated*

BUDGET

Maximum budget for the project: **\$45,000**

ALLOWABLE COSTS

The following list includes eligible cost categories for this funding:

- Contractor(s) time paid
- Contractor(s) mileage if traveling to other sites for scope-specific events
- Mileage for event attendees to come on site
- Lodging for attendees if they're coming overnight to a location
- Provision of lunch if an event or training is all day

The following list includes ineligible cost categories for this funding:

- Stipends to compensate attendees for participation
- Supplies to distribute to attendees
- Additional training for contractor(s)

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PROJECT BACKGROUND

RFSI Background

The VAAFAM has entered into a cooperative agreement with the US Department of Agriculture (USDA) and the Agricultural Marketing Service (AMS) to administer the Resilient Food Systems Infrastructure (RFSI) program in Vermont.

The purpose of the RFSI program is to build resilience in the middle of the food supply chain. The program also works to strengthen local and regional food systems by creating new revenue streams.

The “middle of the supply chain” refers to processing and aggregation/distribution. This includes all post-harvest activities before a product reaches the consumer or a retail outlet. Examples of these activities include processing, value-add, storage, manufacturing, aggregation, distribution, transport, and wholesale. The RFSI program is only intended to support the promotion of local and regional agricultural and food products. The program is not intended to support the following types of agricultural products and processing: meat, poultry, wild-caught seafood, exclusively animal feed and forage products, cannabis, fiber, landscaping products, tobacco, dietary supplements, or hemp-derived CBD.

VAAFAM used a portion of the RFSI funds to award competitive [Infrastructure and Equipment-only grants](#) in 2024 and 2025. Grants were awarded to Vermont food and farm businesses to help them expand capacity and infrastructure to support aggregation, processing, manufacturing, storing, transporting, wholesaling, or distribution of locally and regionally produced food products.

VAAFAM has reserved RFSI funds for more general support of the middle of the food supply chain. The goal of this implementation structure is to support a greater number of businesses beyond the individual grant recipients. VAAFAM has decided to allocate a portion of these additional funds to address food safety. This decision was made in response to feedback from operations and key partners in Vermont. Specifically, these funds will address knowledge, application and resource gaps regarding both regulatory and market access food safety standards for middle of supply chain operations.

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Food Safety Needs for the Middle of Supply Chain in Vermont

Vermont has experienced a broad expansion in the presence of aggregation, storage and distribution businesses in Vermont in the last decade. These businesses have evolved through stages of rapid growth and portfolio expansion during this timeframe. Broadly, operations have shifted from largely local, direct-to-consumer sales to also selling to schools, institutions and regional buyers across a larger geography. This is especially true for Vermont's food hubs. The landscape of foundational food safety understanding and application is broad and varied in Vermont, because of these dynamics.

Vermont's aggregators, distributors and storage operations have stated how important it is for their industry to facilitate access to safe, nutritious food products within and beyond the state. The industry has also stated the need for support in moving from current conditions to operationalizing strong food safety programs. Strong food safety programs will be in alignment with both federal food safety standards and market-access food safety auditing schemes required by institutions and buyers.

Only a small number of operations in Vermont currently require compliance of some kind for food safety. The VAAFAM anticipates that many of the operations in this industry are moving towards required compliance. This could be through Food Safety Modernization Act (FSMA) rule for Preventative Controls for Human Consumption (PCHC) or for market. A key aspect to effective food safety culture and programming is ensuring sufficient time to understand what future requirements will be.

Factors informing current food safety knowledge and application landscape:

- Complexity in understanding the FSMA PCHC:
 - Understanding an operation's status, and
 - Understanding and meeting status-related required activities.
- Lack of centralized and accessible resources regarding:
 - The core tenants of food safety, and
 - How to build out a food security plan based on the best federal practices.
- Support needed to navigate evolving market-access food safety schemes; these overlap with, but do not completely align with, federal food safety standards.

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- Support required to understand how to prioritize food safety implementation; conducting risk analyses based on infrastructure, practices, products, and end users.
- Requesting resources for navigating operations' aging infrastructure and point of sale (POS) systems, both of which play central roles in strong food safety systems.
- Navigating different State Agencies for various regulations and understanding overlap and differences between different rules, certifications, and regulators.

VAAFM seeks to address these stated needs and requests in Vermont by hiring a contractor to coordinate conversation-based learning events. These events will address the challenges listed above and other food safety needs that arise. Additionally, the contractor will document the needs, available resources, and lessons learned through these events. This documentation will inform continued industry support.

STATEMENT OF WORK

VAAFM seeks a contractor to develop and facilitate a series of roundtable conversations for Vermont's aggregation, distribution and storage industry and related regulators. The contractor should additionally incorporate one-on-one (1:1) or smaller group conversations. The contractor will develop an Action Plan for each food hub participant to outline next steps for implementation of food safety structures and practices.

The goal of this work is to:

1. Develop more uniform understanding of foundational food safety requirements and best practices across the industry,
2. Facilitate technical assistance and resource sharing between regulators, service providers and industry, and
3. Facilitate space for each individual operation to understand which regulations and food safety schemes are most applicable to their operation based on structure and operational goals, and

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4. Document remaining education, resource and facilitation gaps to be addressed in the future.

This work will include:

- At least one roundtable with food hub industry representatives only. The goal of this structure is for industry to discuss current questions and resource needs regarding establishing foundational food safety understanding and how best to operationalize food security plans.
- At least one roundtable with food hub industry representatives and regulators. The goals of this structure are sharing formal regulatory frameworks and knowledge, understanding technical assistance resources, and providing space for industry to share their experiences with regulators.
- For each food hub participant, at least one one-on-one (1:1) conversation or follow-up. The goal of this structure is to support the participant in understanding what elements are needed for their operation and growth plan.
- For each food hub participant, developing a written Action Plan. The goal of this structure is to tailor next steps to meet each operation's needs.

Note: Four (4) Vermont-based non-profit food hubs will be included in this work at minimum. It may include additional non-profit food hubs. It may also include for-profit food hubs and other aggregation/distribution/storage businesses as well.

Topics to be addressed through roundtable and one-on-one (1:1) conversation are:

- Understanding FSMA PCHC Coverage and Exemption Statuses and Requirements,
- Understanding the process of building a food security plan,
- Understanding sections of a food security plan and procedures to develop, including:
 - Hazard Analysis
 - Preventative Controls
 - Supply Chain Program
 - Recordkeeping, and

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- Understanding available technical assistance and pathways to access those.

The contractor will propose structure and cadence of roundtable and one-on-one conversations. The contractor will also propose any additional offerings, and specific agendas to meet the deliverables of this scope. The contractor will plan and execute all event details and logistics. The VAAFM will be available to support marketing and promotions for the events. The VAAFM can co-facilitate or support sessions if desired by the contractor. Contractor will be responsible for cadence and organization of the one-on-one (1:1) conversations and will write Action Plans for each food hub participant.

All project work must be completed and all budget items expended by December 31, 2026.

A report to VAAFM, including performance measures and deliverables, must be submitted by January 30, 2027.

DELIVERABLES

Deliverables and performance metrics associated with each activity in the proposal are finalized.

- Contractor will conduct a kickoff planning meeting with VAAFM project team,
- Contractor will conduct a regular monthly meeting with VAAFM project team to provide project updates,
- Contractor will organize and facilitate at least one roundtable with food hub industry representatives only,
- Contractor will organize at least one roundtable with food hub industry representatives and regulators,
- Contractor will conduct at least one, one-on-one (1:1) conversation with each participant food hub, and
- Contractor will develop and share a written Action Plan with each operation.

Reporting

By January 30, 2027, the contractor will submit a final report which:

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- Highlights key activities conducted. This includes number of events, number of one-on-one (1:1) conversations, and number of industry and regulatory attendees at each event,
- Summarizes themes, needs, and lessons learned addressed during events,
- Summarizes qualitative and quantitative data captured during conversations, and
- Proposes key next steps for VAAFMM project team as follow up to the outreach events.

SUBMISSION REQUIREMENTS

The following must be included with all proposals:

1. Cover page with organization or business name, project title, and the project point of contact. This should include both phone and email and reflect who is responsible for responding to questions regarding the proposal. Total project budget should also be included.
2. Approach, background, and experience of the organization or business. This should include:
 - a. History of the contractor, list of current and/or notable clients, a description of the contractor's experience with a project of this type and scale, and what makes your firm the right fit for this project.
 - b. **Suggested length for this section** is no more than two pages.
3. Proposed work plan, activities, deliverables, reporting measures, and timeline.
 - a. Using a layout of your choosing (e.g., table or bulleted list), provide details on each element of the proposed schedule of events including roundtables and one-on-one (1:1) conversation. Additionally, provide the entities you will include and describe how you will conduct outreach and engage participation of food hubs. Please also provide agenda topics and describe intended flow for the conversations. Include the desired outcomes of each conversation. Describe how you will measure the outcomes, and over what timeline. Finally, please include both short- and long-term goals for the project.

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5. Resumes of the project team leader and any other personnel included.
 - a. **One page maximum length per person.**
6. Please note: While the following documentation is not required for the purpose of submitting a proposal it must be submitted before an award can be finalized:
 - a. Certificate of Insurance which meets the criteria as outlined in [Attachment C](#).
 - b. W-9 ink signed within the last six months.

SELECTION CRITERIA

Proposals will be scored according to the following criteria. After each criteria description, the total points available for that section are provided.:

1. Previous experience and resumes of those involved show that the bidder is qualified and has the capacity and knowledge to generate successful project outcomes. **Total of 25 points.**
2. Proposal demonstrates an understanding of Vermont food hubs and food safety needs and challenges within Vermont's food hub sector. **Total of 15 points.**
3. Proposal demonstrates an understanding of Federal food safety standards and market-access food safety auditing schemes. **Total of 10 points.**
4. Project approach, timeline, and proposed activities of the workplan is clear, comprehensive, and fulfills all aspects of the RFP. **Total of 15 points.**
5. Proposal articulates how the proposed schedule of activities will address each of the four goals stated on pg. 5 of the RFP. **Total of 10 points.**
6. Budget is realistic, detailed, and clearly tied to the proposed workplan. **Total of 20 points.**
7. Budget includes only allowable expenses. **Total of 5 points.**

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