

Farm Investment Fund is a boost to Farmers and their Non-Farming Neighbours



Sebastian Margarit and Brenna Koneczny are a young couple who didn't originally come from farming backgrounds, but who now are deeply immersed with and dedicated to growing food for Nova Scotians. They own Vista Bella Farm, a Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) operation in Malagash, NS, where they grow more than 40 fruit and vegetable crops, including some specialty items such as artichokes, heirloom tomatoes, asparagus, and fingerling potatoes. They sell most of their produce through CSA shares, with surplus produce being sold at one of several seasonal farm markets in the area.

"We are in a minority as new entrants into agriculture," Sebastian says. "We entered the industry from scratch, taking on a farm that had been mainly fallow for the last 50 years. We didn't inherit a farm operation, we had no equipment, no infrastructure, and no fertility in our fields."

The Farm Investment Fund has been a huge help to the couple in the past three years, as they work to develop and expand their croplands and production. "FIF allowed us some assistance with lime subsidies to increase our land's fertility, effectively turning acidic, unproductive land into relatively good soil for vegetable production," Sebastian says. "We had help with compost purchases for use in starting seedlings in the greenhouse, which reduced our reliance on non-renewable peat resources. We also had assistance in building a pond for use in drip irrigation, and electrical upgrades for our cold storage building. We modernized our cleaning methods for our produce, allowing us to

make an investment in food safety that is otherwise quite difficult for small farm operations." As a plus for the local community, local tradesmen and other business people from the Malagash area were involved in the improvement work that Sebastian and Brenna have done to date.

As Sebastian and Brenna continue to develop and improve their farm, they are seeing benefits to their local community, in no small part due to the availability of the Farm Investment Fund. "We're one of a number of new farms in our area: smaller-scale, crop diverse farms similar to some operations in the Valley," Sebastian says. "We feel the FIF has been a boost not only to farmers like ourselves, but to non-farming neighbours and visitors who have more access to locally grown specialty crops without having to travel an hour or more to large stores or farmers markets."

"The Farm Investment Fund gives small farmers a fighting chance to enter the marketplace," Brenna says. "We were able to make upgrades to our infrastructure sooner than we'd originally anticipated with the fund's help." They hope to access more assistance as they continue to develop their farm's soil quality and introduce new crops, including berries and tree fruit. Sebastian points out that he and his partner "are very aware that we are stewards of the land." Many of the programs in the FIF are focused on helping farmers become more environmentally responsible; helping with better manure storage, drip irrigation, ponds for rainwater collection, and similar uses. He points out that as producers who sell directly to consumers, "we are entrusted by our customers to take care of the land we produce our food on, and our direct market relationships make that a much easier association to create than the typical wholesaler can achieve."

FIF allows a bridge between the general public's expectations of farmers and the economic reality of farming, by investing in growers who are willing to make smart long-term decisions. In Sebastian Margarit's view, "This is the way to keep more new farmers on their land for many years to come, instead of trying it out for a few years and giving up because no-one seems to care."