

# Co-ops & Farmers Working Together

## Celebrating 2012 as the International Year of Co-ops

by Bonnie Hudspeth, Membership & Outreach Coordinator, Neighboring Food Co-op Association



Have you noticed that co-ops are popping up everywhere? We have three new food co-ops organizing in New Hampshire alone! People in Keene, Walpole, and Manchester are working to support local farmers and producers and take back control of where their food comes from by organizing community-owned, democratically run grocery stores. And, this growth in new co-ops is happening all across our region.

From farmer co-ops to food co-ops, credit unions to worker co-ops, energy co-ops to artisan co-ops, there are more than 1,400 cooperative businesses across New England, employing more than 22,000 people. The Neighboring Food Co-op Association (NFCA) is a network of 30 established and start-up food co-ops, locally owned by more than 80,000 people across New Hampshire, Vermont, Massachusetts, Connecticut, and Rhode Island. A majority of our country's 2 million farmers are members of about 3,000 agricultural co-ops. Globally, nearly one billion people are members of cooperatives – more than directly own stock in publicly traded corporations! In fact, the United Nations has declared 2012 “The International Year of Co-ops” to promote the impact that co-ops have in creating jobs, increasing access to quality food, and reducing poverty around the world.

So how can cooperatives meet our needs in our communities? As a steady retail outlet for local farms, food co-ops play a significant role in the regional agricultural economy.

“Our co-ops work hard to develop relationships with farmers and producers that are fair and that contribute to a more sustainable regional food system,” says Erbin Crowell, NFCA Executive Director.

Food co-ops have been leaders in the development of natural, organic, local, and Fair Trade movements in our region and across the country, and a recent study found that NFCA member food co-ops purchased more than \$33 million in local products in 2007 alone!

The member co-ops of NFCA are also partnering with like-minded organizations, including NOFA, the Cooperative

Fund of New England, and farmer co-ops such as Organic Valley, to advance shared goals. One example of what can be accomplished through these partnerships is the Farm to Freezer project ([www.nfca.coop/regionalsourcing](http://www.nfca.coop/regionalsourcing)), launched by the NFCA in partnership with Sunrise Orchards and Deep Root Organic Co-op to explore a branded line of frozen fruits and vegetables grown, processed, and distributed here in the Northeast.

The Neighboring Food Co-ops are also working with the New England Farmers Union (NEFU) to engage and empower co-op shoppers in policy decisions like the Farm Bill that affect agriculture across our region. NFCA member food co-ops have hosted educational forums for farmers, consumers, and food system advocates, and co-op members and staff have joined the NEFU in meeting with legislators to discuss crucial issues facing New England farmers and fishermen.

“Co-ops have long been an agent of change,” says Crowell. “And we believe that farmers and consumers – working together as activists and advocates – can be a powerful voice for a more healthy, just, and sustainable regional food system.”

So, if you are not already a member-owner of a co-op in your community, just do it! Join with the one billion people worldwide who have met their needs through a co-op. And, for more info about co-ops in New England, visit the NFCA's website: [www.nfca.coop](http://www.nfca.coop).



Bonnie Hudspeth is the Outreach Coordinator for the Neighboring Food Co-op Association ([www.nfca.coop](http://www.nfca.coop)), a cooperative of 30 food co-ops and start-up initiatives with a combined membership of more than 80,000 people across New Hampshire, Vermont, Connecticut, Massachusetts, and Rhode Island.

Photography courtesy of the NFCA.



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**Fall is here and that means harvest time!** Check out D Acres of NH full calendar of workshops and events to share the bounty and learn the skills of food preservation & fall garden care. [www.dacres.org](http://www.dacres.org), [info@dacres.org](mailto:info@dacres.org), or 603-786-2366. See you at the farm!

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