

Pioneer Valley Vegetables

Franklin County Community Development Corporation
Western Massachusetts Food Processing Center

<https://www.fccdc.org/food-processing/>

Trip description

This document describes a short visit to Western Massachusetts Food Processing Center in Greenfield, MA on July 9th, 2018. The Western Mass Food Processing Center operates a shared-used commercial kitchen, produces a line of frozen produce (Pioneer Valley Vegetables), works with the regional farm to school program, co-packs frozen produce for farmers for off-season box-subscription (CSA) programs, and undertakes other activities. The Western Mass Food Processing Center is part of the Franklin County Community Development Corporation. The food processing center is only a part of the broader FCCDC work, which cannot be commented on. Additionally, the brief 2-hr visit to the processing center provided only an initial introduction to the operation as reported here.



The intent of the visit was to learn about:

- The operations of the shared use kitchen
- The equipment and infrastructure in place at this mixed use value-added food processing facility, including for cold, dry and frozen storage capacity, and shared equipment
- Facility layout and flow
- Operations of a frozen produce processing line
- Basic costing approach for purchasing produce, sales price, training fees and rental fees

General Notes

- Revenue sources: the facility rents kitchen space, produces Pioneer Valley Vegetables, rents to an anchor tenant who makes Kombucha, and provides food safety and business training
- Equipment at the facility is varied, documented in Appendix I, and generally includes blender-mixers, steam jacket kettles, an Individual Quick Freeze (IQF) frozen processing line, broccoli floretter, bottle fillers, a bottle labeling machine, and chopper-dicers.
- The frozen processing line, Pioneer Valley Vegetables focuses on broccoli, carrots and blueberries. A limited snap-shot of prices paid for conventional produce at a wholesale rates, and



average charge respective is broccoli (\$0.85/lb and \$1.75/lb) and carrots, (\$0.40/lb and \$1.25/lb), and average charge.

- The frozen produce operation grossed 75,000 lbs of product in 2017, and with a production target for 2019 of 250,000 lbs.
- The facility co-packs strawberries and blueberries for local farms



Use costs

- The cost to farmers to use the facility is labor (if any food safety or processing assistance is needed), and the kitchen rental
- Labor is charged at \$20/person/hr, and includes wage and workers compensation
- The rental rate to use the facility is \$45/hr
- An example: 300 lbs blueberries with a processing rate of 3,000 lbs per day, working 8 hour day. This is a rate of 375 lbs per hour, an estimated 2-hour rental total with set up and clean up, and two people working. The rental would cost \$90, and labor \$80, resulting in \$170 to process 300 lbs of blueberries.
- Space is available as well to rent cool and frozen storage space.

Facility information

- 2,000 sf processing kitchen
- Pallet racking in all storage areas
- Capacity, dry: 90 pallets
- Capacity, cool: 84 pallets
- Capacity, frozen: 84 pallets
- Anchor tenant: Art Bev, meads, kombucha, ginger beer



Other notes: cool and frozen storage is critical to provide flexibility on produce drop offs, pick-ups, processing time, and product storage. Don't need to have all broccoli exactly at 8am at farm on day of pick-up, and processing that very day. Can bring in product, get into cool storage, process within a day or two

Organization/plans needed to operate the facility:

- Standard operating procedures
- Good Manufacturing Practices
- Food Defense Plan
- Transportation [Defense] Plan
- Recall plans
- Emergency action plans
- *have a director of operations and three food processing staff

Seasonality

April – June: quiet



July – March: booked every day, with at least 1 client
At beginning: sometimes would only be 1 business per month

Staffing

Trained staff is critical, providing training, accessing supplies, and actual production/kitchen help as needed. Staff:

- Is trained on equipment
- Is trained on food safety
- Can provide training to entrepreneurs

Sales/buyers

- Compass Group, work with Chartwells, and within them, the K-12 group
- Aramark (not a buyer, among top 3 food service businesses)
- Sudexo (not a buyer, among top 3 food service businesses)
- The facility works with self-operated institutional kitchens
- Also sell to:
 - Franklin County Corrections
 - A few hospitals, and they want to move in direction of working in health care industry

Timing, steps and quality considerations

- 2 min on average to freeze all products. 2-4 min to freeze broccoli
- 1-2 minutes, minimal, to freeze blueberries
- Blueberries: minimal steps, no processing, just freeze
- Broccoli: wash, floret, quality control, steam bath, cool bath, drain, freeze
- For frozen processing, no vacuum sealing, not required. If frozen with IQF, quality does not require vacuum sealing unless doing potatoes because so susceptible to oxidation (would turn brown), so they vacuum seal potatoes



Equipment Acquisition

- Utilize grants to purchase all the different equipment
- If some business wants a piece of equipment, can either buy themselves and store at the facility.
- If they want to share the equipment, FCCDC will split the cost with the business to acquire the new equipment, or work out some arrangement that works for all parties

Layout

- Changes every day
- Open concept besides fixed hoods and steam-jacket kettles
- See drawing and pictures

Business development

- Train in use of kitchen
- Business readiness instruction, i.e.
 - Where are you getting your food grade glass?
 - Do you have your ingredients and weights?
- Words of wisdom:
 - “Food processing is like turning your home recipe into a science experiment: you take something you evaluated by taste, and make it a precise product that turns out the same every time”
 - “Every process is a riddle”



Questions

- Do processing averages per day assume an 8-hr day, single shift
- Do they assume 1, 2 or 3 staff processing?
- What is the cost to rent storage space?

