

Vetiver Solutions brings practical approaches to sustainability in Haiti

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Landscape view of Moreau, Haiti, the source of Vetiver Solution's beeswax and honey products.

EDITOR'S NOTE: This is the fifth in a series of articles featuring past winners of e-Fest, EIX's undergraduate business plan competition, and their journey since then.

Vetiver Solutions is a public benefit corporation founded by students from the University of Minnesota that invests in natural goods promoting economic and environmental sustainability to help impoverished Haitian communities.

The corporation coordinates two programs with their farmer partners in Moreau, Haiti. The first involves incentivizing farmers to grow vetiver grass: a tall and sterile grass highly recommended to prevent soil erosion in increasingly arid environments like in Moreau. Planted between crops, this grass allows the soil to recover its lost fertility over time.

Vetiver Solutions encourages planting this grass by offering to purchase a predetermined amount of vetiver shoots every six months. They use the fibers from these shoots in their beeswax products and yarn-woven bath and home goods, which are sold in the U.S.

Beeswax also ties into their second program: they provide Moreau farmers with the opportunity to earn an additional source of income for their beeswax and honey by selling through Vetiver Solutions. From these, the company creates products like "Amour, Moreau" honey and "Bee Good, Do Good" lip balm to sell at the Whittier Farmers Market in Minneapolis, MN.

"We simply see our role as connectors," Chief Marketing Officer Brie LaPlante said, "bringing their vetiver and bee products to new markets in the US to grow their income opportunities outside of Haiti and share the story of their work to eradicate poverty and malnutrition in their community. We are glad we can

provide capital and scale to grow these efforts, and invest in farmer-led solutions for environmental challenges like soil erosion and deforestation."

Vetiver Solutions won the Social Impact award at the 2018 student entrepreneur competition e-Fest, and with it a \$25,000 prize.

"The money we won from e-Fest has been invaluable," Chief Science Officer Elizabeth Alonzi said. "Prior to e-Fest, our team spent as much time writing grant proposals as we did actually working on our company! The e-Fest prize really allowed us to focus our time where it mattered and push our business forward in ways we wouldn't have been able to without funding."

The corporation largely meets its financial goals using funds earned through grants and competitions like e-Fest. Most of its funds, 72%, go directly to the Moreau Farmers' Association to be distributed within the farming community. In 2019, that included about 40% of all expenses going directly to Haitians and Haitian-lead organizations.

Begun in Minnesota in 2016, CEO Jesse Abelson's company formed in direct response to what he saw during a volunteer opportunity in Moreau three years prior. Working at a hospital in Port-Au-Prince, Abelson "witnessed countless deaths and illnesses" brought on by immense levels of poverty and malnutrition, as described on [the Vetiver Solutions website](https://www.vetiversolutions.org/) (<https://www.vetiversolutions.org/>).

Since e-Fest, the company has suspended its work with vetiver grass to focus solely on promoting its beekeeping initiative. They partner with Citadel, the name of the man who heads the Farmers' Association in Moreau.

"We had previously found an area of overlap with vetiver grass – our Haitian partners had been trying to grow its usage as a soil stabilizer and we had found a method to



commercialize it," CSO Alonzi said. "That work continues, but our partners came to us looking for an opportunity to sell their beeswax, which they have no local market for."

"Beekeeping fits right into our goals of promoting sustainable agriculture, and beeswax products have an established market niche," Alonzi added. "So we began purchasing their bee products and promoting the beekeeping initiative."

The team has supported over 60 hives in Haiti through their partnership, offering the farmers' bee products at prices "significantly above all international averages," according to CMO LaPlante.

The beekeeping initiative sets a precedent for sustainable agricultural practices on the local level at a time of extreme risk to global food security: beeswax products translate to 90% of the world's nutrition, and the global bee population continues to decline.

It has been a slow process creating a brand new market for raw vetiver, but selling beeswax products has allowed the team to reach consumers directly and engage in an already-established market.

"When we restructured our operations to include beeswax products, we had to adjust how we could sell vetiver in order for our new customer base to interact with it," CSO Alonzi said. "Instead of looking at vetiver string and cloth, we are instead incorporating vetiver fibers as exfoliants in our beeswax products and into woven bath and home goods that fit in with our Amor, Moreau and Bee Good Do Good brands."

Over the course of their 2019 pilot year for the beeswax and honey products, they launched 10 new products, acquired 200 plus customers, and sold 110 jars of honey, completely selling out within 12 months. Vetiver Solutions also earned over \$3,700 in 12 markets in the Summer and Fall of that year before they sold out on all of their products.

Here's a look at the company's current status.

EIX STARTUP

SNAPSHOT

The Product:

Products include "Bee Good, Do Good" lotion bars and lip balms (made with Haitian beeswax, shea butter and essential oils from sustainable/ethical suppliers), and "Amour, Moreau" Haitian honey (citrus-flavored honey from the fruit trees that the bees in rural Haiti pollinate). Some of these beeswax products also incorporate vetiver fibers as exfoliants.

The Potential Market:

Vetiver Solutions targets U.S. consumers who care deeply about environmental sustainability and ethical business practices. The company launched retail sales last year at farmers' markets and craft markets in Minnesota and Wisconsin, to meet with and become familiar with their customers and to share the story of the Moreau farmers.

"As US consumers seem to make their purchases more selectively and

based on their personal values, we think there is boundless market potential for Haitian natural goods," CMO Brie LaPlante said.

The Minimum Viable Product (MVP):

"Amour, Moreau" raw honey and "Bee Good, Do Good" lip balm served as Vetiver Solution's first Haitian products in the U.S market. The company has also since added Bee Good lotion bars and updated the packaging for its lip balm after taking in customer feedback.

Stage of Development:

Vetiver Solutions continues to grow its operations and reach within Haiti following the initial Moreau pilot in 2017, and looks to expand its variety of products offered to U.S consumers. Since e-Fest, they have paused their work with vetiver grass-based products to focus on their beekeeping initiative.

Annual Sales:

Not addressed for this year, but the company raised over \$3,700 last year in products sold between 12 markets.

Source of Idea:

The company formed in

Minnesota in 2016, though CEO Jesse Abelson knew from his time three years earlier in Haiti that he wanted to find impactful ways to alleviate poverty and human suffering in Haitian communities. Partnerships with Haitian farmers, including members of Haiti's Farmers' Association, first introduced the team to rural beekeeping.

Traction:

The team now supports over 60 beehives in Haiti, and the move to selling bee products at farmers' and crafts markets in the Midwest U.S. has boosted sales over time.

Over the course of 2019, Vetiver Solutions found success in the following metrics: 10 new products launched, 200 plus customers acquired, and 110 jars of honey sold, completely selling out within a 12 month period. The company earned over \$3,700 between 12 markets that Summer and Fall, before selling out on all of their products.

Vetiver Solutions also ran a successful 2018 year-end fundraiser to install the first

Moreau solar panel system, providing access to a reliable, renewable source of energy. Hired workers installed the panels the following year.

“This investment in sustainable energy in Moreau supports access to education, markets, civil life, health care, and much more,” CMO LaPlante said. “Countless studies have shown that accessibility to electricity has huge impacts on decreasing poverty rates and is a major step towards sustainable development.”

The team also maintains an active, vibrant online profile reaching more than 4,000 unique users: that includes 3,736 users through 91 Facebook posts and, in 2019, 1,269 visitors to their website from 61 different countries.

Vetiver Solutions partners include the [Acara](http://environment.umn.edu/leadership/acara/) (http://environment.umn.edu/leadership/acara/) leadership incubator program and the [Institute on the Environment](http://environment.umn.edu/) (http://environment.umn.edu/), both at the University of Minnesota, the youth-lead non-profit group [Mijaba Bainenet](http://www.mijaba.org/)(http://www.mijaba.org/) and the [Spam Football Club](https://www.spamfc.com/) (https://www.spamfc.com/) (a men’s league team in the Minnesota Amateur Soccer League and a 501(c)3).

Biggest Challenge:

Preparing a reliable supply chain has been quite difficult for the company, and what they consider their biggest hurdle. The advent of COVID-19 has

only exacerbated the situation, prompting the team to pause shipments and travel to Haiti to minimize unnecessary risk for their partners.

How they're dealing with the challenge:

CMO LaPlante talked about the importance of flexibility, adaptability and the capacity to innovate as a small business, and described a resolve not to get caught up by small setbacks. The company works both "harder and smarter" to find meaningful solutions for themselves and their partners in Haiti.

"A big part of that is asking questions and listening -- rather than trying to do what we may think is the right answer," LaPlante said.

Teammates:

Jesse Abelson (CEO), Elizabeth Alonzi (Chief Science Officer), Dalton Schutte (Chief Finance Officer), Brie LaPlante (Chief Marketing Officer), Leeore Levinstein (Board Member), Becca Desens (Board

Member) and Dr. Jeff Losier (In-Country Coordinator).

Mentors and Advisors:

Fred Rose and Meghan Voorhees from Acara/Institute on the Environment at the University of Minnesota.

Resources at college that helped:

The team credits Acara and the Institute on the Environment for their effective support and mentorship, as well as the University of Minnesota's Grand Challenge courses for teaching young entrepreneurs valued innovation skills and how to create impactful solutions to complex global issues.

Honors and Accolades:

In addition to winning the Social Impact award at the 2018 student entrepreneur competition e-Fest, Vetiver Solutions is also recognized for the following:

- 2017 Acara Challenge Silver Prize
- Acara Charles C. Jackson Mini Grant Recipient

- IonE Grant Recipient
- Common Bond Semi-Finalist
- Clinton Global Initiative University Poster Presenter
- D-Prize 2nd Round
- Schulze Entrepreneurship Finalist (4th Place)
- Sustainability Expo Lightning Talk Winner
- BizPitch Finalist
- MN Cup Semifinalist
- Ideas4Action Regional Finalist
- 2018 Acara Fellowship Grant

**Advice for
aspiring Student
Entrepreneurs:**

Vetiver Solutions recommends building strong relationships within your working community and remembering to ask questions, listen to others and collaborate.

CSO Elizabeth Alonzi referred to their partnerships with Haitian farmers as fundamental to their business, as they are the true experts on local agriculture and best practices for impacting the community in a meaningful way.

"Listening to our partners and their

new ideas has expanded Vetiver Solutions into impactful areas we never would have anticipated," Alonzi said. "Find the people who are unafraid to disagree with you, teach you, and work with you - that is how you get an idea to market."

Read More

[Past e-Fest Winners Continue Innovating](https://eiexchange.com/content/past-efest-winners-continue-innovating)

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