September 19, 2022

To:  Members of the Soil Health and Payment for Ecosystem Services Working Group

From:  Paul Doton

Doton Farm LLC, Barnard, VT

To my fellow members of the Soil Health and Payment for Ecosystem Services Working Group:

I am writing to you to detail my perspective as a farmer and my experiences accessing conservation programs over the past year, in the hopes of reminding the Working Group of our legislative directives and ensuring we are on the best course for creating a PES program that is additive and not burdensome to Vermont’s farmers. I am also the chair of the Connecticut River Watershed Farmers Alliance, but these are my personal thoughts.

Over the past year, I have applied for or participated in the following conservation programs:  a DBIC grazing cohort, the State of the Soil project, CSP, EQIP, FAP, PSWF, and PFP.  In my experience over the past year, I have witnessed a lack of communication and coordination between the programs and people that are supposed to be supporting farmers and ecosystems, exasperating the burden that is placed on farmers who are trying to do a good job for their family, community, and the world.  We ( at CRWFA) have been working closely with White River Conservation District and our local NRCS field office to try to navigate these programs, but still we feel overburdened and frustrated by the process.  There is a shortage of highly trained staff to help navigate programs, and we do not have time to sort through them on our own. At this point on my farm, I wonder if I would be better off forgetting about some of these programs - the practices I am attempting to install are expensive, and I am not sure if I can even find the labor to install it within the state and federal timelines.

I was disappointed to hear that NRCS did not have designated funding to support a second round of grazing funds this year; a fact I found out too late in the season to seek out other funding for my animal trails and fencing needs.  I wonder whether the NRCS and the State Technical Committee made the decision to limit the available pasture funds because they thought the needs would be covered by other grazing programs such as those through DEC, VAAFM, and DBIC. .

.  I am really concerned about people who have their nose to the grindstone on their farms and could use assistance, but do not know how to get help or cannot take the time to navigate all the overlapping state and federal program options. Fundamentally, we have too many programs to navigate, and they don't work together - in fact in many ways they negate each other.

What I would like to see come out of the PES Working Group is for farmers to have a clearer picture of what is involved with getting help to begin with, including knowing upfront what the criteria is, what the procedure will be, and having streamlined access to funding.  We should be figuring out how to put programs together to get maximum benefits to the farmers and to ecosystem enhancements.  Let’s give farmers options, not mandates.

    We need to complement federal programs, avoid state-level duplication of efforts, and to build improved communication between agencies and agriculture service providers.

Thank you for listening and for your dedication to helping reduce burdens and improve the environment for Vermont’s farmers.

Sincerely,

Paul Doton