

Statewide Virtual Listening Session (December 2023) Notes

Date: 12/18/23

Location: Virtual (Statewide Teams Webinar)

Attendees: 28 attendees (including VAAFM staff and legislative representatives)

Common Acronyms

NRCD: Natural Resource Conservation District

NRCS: Natural Resource Conservation Service

VAAFM: Vermont Agency of Agriculture, Food, and Markets

Notes as Followed

Farmer and Farmworker Housing

- How is VAAFM working with housing organizations and developers on housing needs within farmers and farmworkers. Crisis statewide.
 - Response: several programs out there but not necessarily user friends – open to suggestions. Advocate for more affordable and investment needed.

Flood Recovery and Preparedness Efforts

Environmental, physical, plant physiology responses

- So much rain potentially rotting our root crops of saffron and cut flowers. We were not flooded by a river, just by rain.
- Need to find another farm – was a beautiful field, now a river bottom. Where do I go? Know we have land for good, etc. but always tedious. Hard for folks in threat of the river again.
- Also flood brought more issues with parasites and predators – more impacts beyond flooding. Economic and emotional toll and mental health pieces with that.

Socioeconomic, mental and community impact of flooding

- I was not practiced for this (flood) recovery. Going to need to practice - don't think the worst is over. Our market (Caledonia County) kept us afloat – couldn't get in or out of town for days.

- Made me think about how I can advocate for training to have a greater awareness and warning system. Lucky in terms of loss of life. Ruined lives we have plenty of. Didn't affect all – some just had a rainy day.
- Peer-to-peer with Farm First – other farmers who have gone through trainings to be there for peer support.
- (Answer given to question “Why did you come to the session?”) - Even though I have agricultural community, I'm traumatized (by flood, riverbed erosion).
- Not good at filling out forms; When I did, I got no response, got nothing. Thanks for having this, makes a difference.
- Most support we (farmers) got through flooding was through NOFA's emergency fund grants. For both organic and conventional, they did a good job.

Food Access and Food Insecurity

- Gleaning orgs – heard a huge increase in participation in Montpelier, Stowe, St J, Hardwick esp. Community partners that serve at-risk populations in NEK and Lamoille reported on average a tripling of demand. Dramatic decrease in food available to be gleaned. Interesting and challenging season.
- Would be great for State to offer stronger tax incentive for quality, gleaned food. Salvation Farms talks about frequently – current tax credit is not incentive enough for small or large farmers.
 - Did any language make it within state legislature? Salvation Farms prioritized a request for appropriation for processing facility – how to approach tax incentive is part of long term plan.

Funding Opportunities

- Pointed to larger farm operations – away from small-scale work. How to make programs available.

Legislative & Market Dynamic Question

- Does anyone on the call have an active farm stand? Experiences this year – increased or decreased sales? Vendor at farmers markets and whether they felt it was a good/bad season?
- Question from legislator around sewage and septage spreading and how important it is to farmers.
 - Legislation around PFAS – farm shutdowns in ME and elsewhere. Rep. Templeman issued bill to remove septage and sewage but realizing its more about contamination - want to hear from farmers on how important or unimportant it is.

Listening Session Structure & Feedback

- For other meetings, placed all over state. In-person is great. Folks are wondering if the in-person meetings (so far) have been more dynamic?
- Interest in a hybrid meeting is important. Often cannot take the time to go somewhere and come back after the session.
- Questions around in-person meeting logistics. Much prefer in-person.

Processing (Livestock and Poultry)

- Feedback on meat processing – demand, bottle neck, mobile slaughter. Interest in mobile slaughter? Seems to be a high demand, not so many custom exempt that take in butcher animals.
 - VAAFM had mobile slaughter years before – feedback from operators attempting to use it as profitable business model found it difficult with seasonality. Would love to explore another feasibility study of that model – collaboration with research partners to see if that would be successful?
 - Hoping to build a structure and bring to VT (Connor) with experience in Oregon- issue with freightliner doesn't do well in snow. Want to get thoughts.
- Butcher shop is capacity issue
- VAAFM grants for meat processors. Also noting itinerant slaughterers are aging.
- Chicken farms advocating for chicken processing – not enough in Vermont.
- Booking at least a year out – ie before animals are even born. I've been overbooking and sure others are too.
 - More management for slaughterhouse.
 - No other option to ensure spots when we need them.
 - Also less flexibility when need to change things. If more options for state- and federally-inspected meat options.