

Essex and Orleans County Listening Session Notes

Date: 01/25/24

Location: Hybrid – Brunswick, VT, Newport, VT, Virtual (all connected via video)

Partner(s): Essex County Natural Resources Conservation District (NRCD), Orleans County Natural Resources Conservation District (NRCD)

Attendees: 16 attendees (including VAAFM staff)

Common Acronyms

ANR: Agency of Natural Resources

NRCD: Natural Resource Conservation District

NRCS: Natural Resource Conservation Service

USDA: United States Department of Agriculture

VAAFM: Vermont Agency of Agriculture, Food, and Markets

Notes as Followed

Dairy Processing

- Butterworks Farm producer and processor – farm not profitable, wouldn't survive without processor; what can we do to better support small farms?
 - Investigate why price of dairy doesn't change
 - Dairy only gone up 2 or 3x since 70s, most other things are 25x
 - Federal law not representative of what farmers need – not changed since 1971
- Problem of negotiating with a processor – would say VT we don't need you – harder to get to VT. Dairy Farmers of America (DFA) doesn't want it.
- Trying to cut out every small farm – this is frustrating and sad. VT isn't made for big farms – field spread, needing to be on roads a lot, heavy cold soils.

Economic System & Dynamics

- Dairy industry is continually subsidized. But not in a free market because of federal order. Should get rid of it. No more fixed prices. Need to fix the market. Keep cheese prices low.
- Systemic issue of government control over free market
- Farmers don't need anything we just want to make a profit.
- Beef price needs to be \$4K to be profitable, now at \$1,800
- Put a support price in for beef – consumers won't like it. The day we can't import beef is the day we're in trouble.
 - Will the government tackle federal order?
 - World can't afford food prices. Now on the backs of farmers. Lots of hands in the cookie jar. Needs to be looked at, at the federal level. There are things that the State of Vermont does that don't help agriculture, and there are things that do.
 - Supply and demand
- Overproduce a lot. Farmers are good at what they do – see the money and run after it.
- Size is only thing to keep it going
- Having agriculture in all parts of the state and country gives security – but how much capacity does Vermont have?
- Hemp crashed, after everyone wanted to jump in to support
- Support price for commodities – long term is needed
- Everything getting bigger in country
- Rumors that Agri-Mark and Dairy Farmers of America (DFA) are not in great financial health – consolidated
- Farmers have no options, can't change co-ops. Feed has some options but used to be more
- Lots of control by small amount of people – grocery stores, banks, etc. Even if good people and want to do the right thing, they hold the power. Ie if Walmart said no longer selling to DFA – if you lose, it's detrimental. They all play that game.
- Lots of lobbying in DC
- Consolidation a challenge
- In Vermont, if you want to increase cows, it's a big investment of barns, etc. It's a different world in Mexico where you just need to expand your fence
- Canadian farmers are heavily supported and pretty wealthy – quotas in place
- The US has always enjoyed cheap food – price hasn't increased dramatically as a result. \$8/gallon for milk in Canada. People buy it.
- USDA looks at numbers of farming – can you make a profit? Sheep market. Can USDA fund a business that can be profitable?
- We know a lot of farming is unprofitable. Make a commodity profitable.

- Gov challenge: support to individuals who don't want to go get a job. Many apply with no intention of actually working. Lose benefits if they work so they don't want to.
- Labor is a huge challenge as well. How to change how community and people are supported – paid to sit around and do nothing
- Maple: used to have different grading. As soon as you jump in bed with how someone else does it, lose your specialness

Future of Vermont Farms

- Don't see a good future for dairy in VT – downhill. DFA doesn't need VT. Cute hillside farms that everyone loves to see are aging out. No youth coming in. State needs to look into that – what do they want the identity of the landscape to be.
- It's going to be the next generation's problem – food is critical. In the top few of being able to live. Not your phone or internet.
- Milk doesn't move west because you have Pennsylvania and New York – we're in a good spot if we can figure it out. Need other states to figure out with us.

Grants

- Lots of grants – picking winners and losers – need to get professional grant writers. Is this the way to go?
- Someone who couldn't come to session: dairy farms now becoming grant farms. To be successful, you need to be a grant farm.
- Sarah Damsell (Orleans NRCD): thinking about a grant writer at work – could that be a role for the conservation district?
- Basic stuff needed – paying for inputs, fixing, organic dairy assistance was huge last summer; simple no oversight; send in receipts. Shouldn't just be for organic. The relief was straightforward and simple.
- Benefits of direct payments to farmers – we will use the money. Grants require you to have a project. And a match that you need. If you have a real issue, it's worth fixing with a match. Getting the final report out of me...they were great but I'm sure they were sick of me and won't grant again.
- Recognition that many grants are reimbursement – can NRCS act as fiscal agent and help front money if it's a hurdle?
- Grant people review and have so much paperwork – I'm an in-person person. Grants to help a farm who is not there in a year or two. Better use of that money.
- NRCS can't require financials. During the open comment for the farm bill – say this.
- If you're going to invest public dollars, make sure it's viable.
- Project easier than grant paperwork - I understand it's needed

- Having a local person – can conservation districts help farmer get that done. Not always baked into.
- Conservation district sits within USDA office but not part of federal stuff/NRCS. They can be nimble and meet the needs of the community. Common bureaucracy of grants. Need a local resource.
- NRCDs implore VAAFM to work with them as much as possible to coordinate support and resources.
- Sarah Damsell (Orleans NRCD): if it were baked in more to our programs – you can come into local conservation districts to help with program navigation. District staff in every county – every district plays this role in some level. Established to be bridge between state and local farmers. Perfect role. Their capacity is limited by their own grant/need for flexible funding. Funded by WQ.
- Need a navigator position at VAAFM
- Agritourism – no specific funding but can apply to working lands.

Price of Organic Dairy

- Organic dairy no longer profitable
- Organic valley and others dropped their price – could you give me data of number of organic dairies by county and a 5-year trend (Rob) - business going down

Relationship with Federal Grant Programs

- Relationship of agriculture is different with USDA and state programs – certain directions we want to go in, overlap of our work
- Have we received applications for Resilient Food Systems Infrastructure (RFSI) program yet?
- Is the RFSI program hay eligible?
- USDA had big dairy processor equipment grants; don't know why we fund so much processing/processors for dairy; least profitable is dairy farm, losing more every year
- USDA used to fund lime programs, improvement fields program. Fertilizer inputs, drainage on fields, re-seeding helpful. USDA still has those programs through NRCS – Sarah Damsell (Orleans NRCD)
- Too many programs to the point that NRCS/conservation districts created a book – 100 grant programs for farmers in this state. People aren't talking to each other. What is the role of the districts here?
- When there are too many opportunities, you don't know what exists. Have to dig to find what you need. Endless bureaucracies. Public money is never easy.

- If they could get paid for their products, they wouldn't need grants to build a fence, etc.
- When clean water act passed, just put all that money into creating a VT brand
- Inflation Reduction Act (IRA) – NRCS going to get a lot of that money. Unsure where to spend.

The Vermont Brand

- Want a VT milk brand – so close to Boston and New York. Why doesn't VAAFMM do that? Bobby Starr talking about this a lot. Part is investment of processing on free market. Could there be incentives to offer a VT brand?
 - Folks have discussed in the past
 - How would USDA feel about marketing of premiums? Competitive concerns of other states?
 - Quick relief – Canada keeps loans at 3%. My variable rate loan is 9% through Vermont Economic Development Authority (VEDA). Immediate relief would pump money back to a farm quickly – interest rates should be addressed through the state.
- Get rid of almond milk being called milk; grocery stores in NYC have only a tiny bit of milk, most is alternative/nut juice
- Haven't done a good job at marketing milk – not everyone needs it, nutritious product
- Shouldn't be able to market impossible burger as a burger, etc. - to preserve market access for dairy and meat products
- Common sense issues – needing to list dairy as an allergen for milk
- Branding is important – combining NY and VT cheddar. When you remove seal of quality, VT always had high quality branding. That is changing. Is state doing enough to keep that brand?
- Caring dairy seal - what can separate and create a good brand.
- People drive by and ask if cows go outside – marketing and authenticity. Not always how it seems
- Can VAAFMM support the seal of VT/VT brand with a clover on it. Support with money. So much grant money available. Nowhere for it to go.

VAAFMM, ANR, and Legislation

- We've done all our cleanup.

- Lots of stuff going into lake that isn't from farmers. Double phosphorous from developed land than ag land. If dairy farms are protected, its PR and less phosphorous
- State seems to be looking for info on how to help farms in a broad way. Does anyone in state talk with other parts of the state?
- Wide gap with legislators – no one knows what it takes anymore. A few generations away. Marketing and appealing to those that are making decisions. They care about WQ.
- Do legislators come and talk, dealt with ANR, doesn't want to get into that. ANR and VAAFM should be the same
- Mean well but out of touch. No idea. A few generations away.
- Grants and laws don't translate into what is needed. What is VAAFM's way to pass along information.
- If you don't know anything about it, don't talk about it – folks talking about things they don't understand. Do they listen?
- For you folks (farmers) to come talk to legislators. Agencies provide annual reports and testimony.
- Do they read it? We give a presentation.
- Constantly reacting to things already coming up
- What's the flow of information? Kuddos to VAAFM as you're pretty good.
- Constantly reacting – just saving ourselves from getting completely hammered. Not VAAFM doing that but others.
- Be proactive not reactive
- How to get on committee schedules? Farmers don't have time to come.
- Weekly updates