

Caledonia and Lamoille Counties Listening Session Notes

Date: 01/31/2024

Location: Hardwick, VT

Partner(s): Caledonia County Natural Resources Conservation District (NRCD), Center for an Agricultural Economy

Attendees: 55 attendees (including VAAF^M staff)

Common Acronyms

AOFB: Accessory On Farm Business

NOFA: Northeast Organic Farming Association (of Vermont)

NRCD: Natural Resource Conservation District

NRCS: Natural Resource Conservation Service

USDA: United States Department of Agriculture

Notes as Followed

Accountability

- Asking for these listening sessions with farmers to be more regular.
- There was an ask that everyone in the listening session be sent an email with the subjects that were brought up tonight. We need more accountability, and recognition that people were heard and are actively working to solve the issues that were brought up.
- Grant, maple syrup, person or working group that is tackling each problem. Phone number and email.

AOFB/Act 250

- Act 250 and on-farm accessory use bill, as well as Act 250 and affordable housing
- On farm accessory use bill:
 - A challenging issue and rubs up against Act 250. What we would like to do is as ag diversifies, people are looking for other ways to make money. We're trying to

add some flexibility, i.e. weddings, but this can rub up against Act 250. We want more flexibility on how farms can make money. Act 250 serves the state well, but there are a lot of applications that are too expensive for farms to take on. On farm accessory business will mean that there won't be as many permits needed. There may be some interest to take up some of this legislation this year, but there's also the larger issue of Act 250 and housing. We have staff that have done a lot of stakeholder engagement. We want more flexibility, not as many permits, more stuff on the farm.

- Rep. Henry Pearl, farmer in Danville, serves on house ag committee. Asks about ANR vs Agency of Ag.
- Inter-divisional Agency team has been putting in a lot of work with stakeholders with H 128 Accessory on farm business bill.
- Struggles with filing across agencies and divisions comes back to Act 250. A lot of the programs were set up a while ago, and they served people well back then, but now the state has changed. There are a lot of inefficiencies with paperwork
- How does this affect agrotourism?
 - It could impact agrotourism, affecting flexibility. Some farms are putting an extra home and creating extra income.
- Act 250 and on-farm accessory use bill, as well as Act 250 and affordable housing – understanding regulations, legislative process, and asking for greater policy and financial support for farming communities

Agricultural Plastics

- Ag plastic should be more of a concern for the state. People say they're too dirty and too wet. It's a ridiculous expense for farmers.
- 3-4 years ago, they stopped the recycling of plastic. Farmer has called Montpelier and repeatedly called office of business that used to take ag. plastics and never heard back.
- Vt is seeking businesses/hiring young people. It doesn't make sense that we can't recycle plastic rather than putting it in the landfill. The amount of plastic we're putting in the landfills is an abomination.

Flooding

- Sec. Tebbetts: it's going to be a lot of conversations over the next few years about how we manage river corridors. We're in communication with NRCS.
- Hardwick was hit hard, one person lost about 70 acres of cropland
- The town and state were super busy with flood mitigation, roads were use at your own risk, farm equipment was shut down
- Takeaway: we need more resilient infrastructure
- A farmer has been struggling with NRCS

- Flooding and risk mitigation are an issue. More funds need to be put towards creating resilient communities.
- There are a lot of conversations around risk management for farmers – climate, markets, sustainability, quality of life.
- It has to be sustainable for both the environment and the producer. It's not sustainable if everyone doesn't have enough fresh food, if we're ruining the environment, if we're not getting enough money for the food that is produced.

Grants

- Farmer for 8 years: saying that over those 8 years, she's seen a lot of grants created. It's a long cycle of the same people getting the same grants, and those are the people who have the privilege and access to resources. A lot of farmers simply don't have the time to meet reporting requirements. She thinks there should be other ways to move money in the state aside from grants.
- NOFA grants are said to be a piece of cake, whereas you basically have to call a person for every single question with the NRCS and USDA grants
- Applications are a huge barrier. Direct quote from garlic farmer: 'farmers aren't academics, and this is an academic process'.
- Many farmers can't afford grant writers
- The maple grant caused a lot of frustration, one farmer calling it a 'high priced survey'. He hoped that this information will be useful but is skeptical about where the money will be going.
- Building security is important to farmers, and a way that farmers can build their own resiliency is focusing on their business. Grant funding makes them dependent on something that has nothing to do with farming. We need to stabilize farms. Price stabilization, regular influx of dollars that we know we're going to get.
- Grants are largely inequitable. Those that are privileged enough to have the resources to create a good application are the ones who are receiving most of the grants, and many farmers simply don't have the time it takes for reporting. There's a desire for creating self-sufficient communities, and farmers being dependent on grants isn't going to get us there.

Housing

- Farmer Anecdote: I've been here for almost 20 years, first started farming in lower Danville. There were 5 farmers farming in the area, now I'm the only one left. The farmer describes the time he was mentoring someone from NY, he came up, and he couldn't find a place to rent or live, and gave up, and moved back to NY. There are so many pressing issues, and unless Vermont has active, viable, farmers, there will be no Agrotourism. He doesn't want money coming from Washington, not a fan of the government.

Maple

- There was discussion as to whether it'd be possible to modify the Free Trade Agreement to stabilize the price of syrup. It's a gamble if you hold onto it waiting for a better price.
- Overall production in Vermont was down this year.
- The price of production, electricity is going up, labor is going up, etc. Everything is driving up the cost of production, but people aren't making enough money. You run the risk of your place to get rid of it if you hold for a few seconds. Retail is tough. There's a lot of work involved, and another big expense to market and pack it all up for retail. Wholesale is also really tough.
- There should be some oversight, some reassurance. When the syrup in VT goes down, and the price of syrup goes down 40 c per gallon... essentially the whole supply and demand doesn't make any sense. There isn't a shortage of syrup, even though reserves are down. And the price of maple on the shelf keeps increasing. It should correspond with the market. Is maple subsidized?
- Maple grants. \$550,000 available, we had \$19 million asked. We know that infrastructure is expensive.
- Farmer said that it seemed like a high-priced survey. There should be something that should get generated from all this information. Farmer is skeptical about where that money is ending up. Sec. Tebbetts recognizes that a lot of people are going to be disappointed.
- Someone else is saying that yes, it is somewhat of a survey, but we can use this to argue to the legislation about allocating more money to maple grants in the future. More funding NEEDS to be available for maple.
- 350 applications, Madison Berry knows that she'll be able to grant less than 15 applicants.
- Sarah is making note that we are talking about equity
- Equitable distribution: one of the key things is that if we were afforded a stable price for syrup, it'd be the fairest, most equitable source of income. Farmers wouldn't need as many grants if syrup prices were more stabilized. There's something to be said about regionally and statewide.
- The price of maple syrup, supply, and demand doesn't make any sense. People are calling for prices to be stabilized.

Processing

- It is getting harder and harder to find processing facilities and harder to do (own) value-added products without those services available or other supports

Farmer, Farmworker Housing

- Not enough large-animal veterinarians, and NOT ENOUGH AFFORDABLE HOUSING FOR THOSE WORKING ON FARMS.

- One farmer is on his 7th veterinarian. Not enough resources. Vermont isn't doing enough to provide resources and infrastructure to keep people around. He wants to be self-sufficient, doesn't want grant money.
- It's getting harder and harder to find vets.

Legislation

- **Cloud Tax:** I wanted to bring up the issue of the cloud tax which is currently being floated at the capitol. This would subject all internet usage and online business expenses to 6% tax, bundled under Vermont's current sales tax. This is concerning for the modern farmers/small business owners, as many of us make much of our income in the online space using online services, software & products to do so. This seems to be just one more way of excessively taxing the people who are actually here living and working in Vermont, and I worry it could keep Vermonters and Vermont farms further removed from access to progressive technology, cultural relevance, and the online sales markets. Aside from contacting our representatives about this personally, is there anything the FSA can do to affect the deliberations on this possible policy in Montpelier?

Support for Farmers

- Farmer Anecdote on current use, paperwork, and red tape:
 - Isn't an ounce of water on his farm that doesn't get caught somewhere and in a manure pit. Towns are upset with farmers and how manure is being managed. There need to be more emphasis on draglines.
 - This past year he had a partner leave the business, which is an LLC. Everything stayed the same, and 6 months afterwards, they got a MASSIVE property tax, when nothing had changed on the farm. Over the years they've acquired a lot of real estate, but it's normal for farmers. Property transfer tax is an issue.
 - Current use. It's crazy. Forestry plans, maps. Is it creating employment in Montpelier? He feels like people are against him. Current use program is crazy.
- NH is getting legislation being formatted to be a no-fly zone. We need to address that as growers, producers of food. Are we going to lose our certifications if the government tracks the weather? It's believed to be a matter of national security.
- A lot of people are looking for protection for farming. Vermont isn't the easiest place to produce anything. We're in markets where there are goods coming in from elsewhere
- Yellow Barn Project. Owned by town of Hardwick, working with a nonprofit Northeast Kingdom Development Corporation. Tenants include Cabot, Jasper Hill, Center for Agricultural Economy.
- More accountability is desired, as well as making sure the farmers feel heard