

Bennington County Listening Session Notes

Date: 02/08/2024

Location: Manchester Center, VT

Partner(s): Bennington County Natural Resources Conservation District (NRCD), Merck Forest and Farmland Center

Attendees: 11 attendees (including VAAFAM staff)

Common Acronyms

AGCWIP: Agricultural Clean Water Initiative Program

ANR: Agency of Natural Resources

NRCC: Natural Resources Conservation Council

NRCD: Natural Resource Conservation District

NRCS: Natural Resource Conservation Service

UVM: University of Vermont

VAAFAM: Vermont Agency of Agriculture, Food, and Markets

Notes as Followed

Farmer Support

- "We have no agency people in the county." Note: it sounds like this participant is referring to people in NRCS, UVM Extension and conservation districts, not solely the Agency of Agriculture. "The water police show up."
- There's no one going around to everyone's farm once a year and asking how they are doing. Michael (Bennington NRCD) and Whitney (Poultney-Mettowee NRCD) are both available to provide this service. Currently the conservation district is reinvigorating its agriculture focus. This is a perennial issue.
- Pat (mushroom producer) suggested getting a group together to help other farmers write grants.

- Michael mentioned that the conservation districts were set up for this type of work but are severely understaffed. Could help 15 to 20 farms/year out of more than 200 with this one-on-one technical assistance and financial assistance.
- AgCWIP supports around 80 conservation district employees around the state.
- Districts in Vermont have no taxing authority (county government) for local institutions as in other states.
- "The best way to reach farmers is to meet them where they're at." Liz has on-farm interview and survey results.
- Challenges with not having a county-based Extension system or an Extension office that a farmer can just walk into and ask questions. Note: Participants are grateful for the work and time of UVM Extension folks and named that they are also severely under-resourced and spread thin.
- Liz and Elizabeth (Merck Forest and Farmland Center and Northshire Grown: Direct) are starting to more regularly amplify resources to their list of farms and food businesses.
- Questions from a farmer about why he can't sell garlic to a restaurant without a license (reporting sales, etc.)
- Farmers and service providers noting that it feels like New York (Washington County) has different manure spreading dates that allow them to spread earlier when the risks may be higher, and that this still impacts Vermont farmers and waterways.
- How can we support farmers on a sustained basis beyond grants?

Grants

- Michael manages a portfolio of around 14 grants "to keep my salary where it needs to be ... and we still can't afford an office." Believe they need around \$3 million for the Natural Resources Conservation Council (NRCC) to be successful.
- Of all of your grant programs, what percent of grant requests come from "this part of the state"?
- Folks in Bennington, Windsor and Windham counties need a better understanding of what's available.
- Historically, Bennington County receives a very small percentage of state grant funds.
- Allowing pre-award costs could be helpful (or even allowing match as a pre-award cost) so that people could get started on a project while they are waiting on the outcome of a grant application.
- Comment on reading in Agriview about grants going to three different companies for compostable cheese wrap. "It all goes up north and it doesn't go to real farming."
- Can VAAFMM refer applicants to Merck and Bennington County Conservation District?
- Appreciate informational webinars and recordings when a grant application opens.

- Received helpful one-on-one Technical Assistance session from Susie Poland when applying for Rural Development grant.
- We should start referring people to their local conservation districts routinely.
- [GrantWatch](#) navigator, requires paid subscription
- NRCS Regional Conservation Partnership Program ([RCPP](#)) project for support of meat, maple, produce perhaps? Discuss with Michael.
- Michael can help connect growers with NRCS.
- [Vermont ripsower](#) could be reauthorized for Conservation Equipment Assistance Program (CEAP). Huge demand and need for this equipment with three potential conservation impacts.
- If there is any way that the Agency could come up with a grant program for smaller things (compare to Spark Grant).
- Many farmers have smaller needs, including just for pieces of equipment, that require investment.

Listening Sessions

- Discussion about how this pilot stakeholder engagement process will help lead to the VAAFMs required stakeholder engagement plan required under the environmental justice law.
- How will findings be compiled or reported?
- Will there be a living document or another way for people who could not attend to provide feedback?
- How did you identify partners to work with in this pilot engagement process?
- VAAFMs staff identified that cross-divisional conversation and collaboration is important; this process is one example, as we identified that VAAFMs Water Quality Division has strong relationships with the conservation districts, while the coordinator of this series (housed in another division) previously overlapped with districts far less
- How many farmers have come to your meetings? Some farmers maybe didn't identify this event as an Agency of Agriculture event.
- Participants noted that outreach to farmers in Bennington County can be difficult.