

Addison County Listening Session Notes

Date: 02/13/2024

Location: Middlebury, VT

Partner(s): Addison County Relocalization Network (ACORN)

Attendees: 22 attendees (including VAAFM staff)

Common Acronyms

ANR: Agency of Natural Resources

NRCD: Natural Resource Conservation District

NRCS: Natural Resource Conservation Service

VAAFM: Vermont Agency of Agriculture, Food, and Markets

Notes as Followed

Act 143 – Accessory on Farm Business Act

- Question about whether farm stays need to have any sales threshold
- Farmer gave example of when they lost flowers due to flood, they had to rely on farm stays and other diversified farm income
- Catie from Foxglove Farm would be willing to testify on the value of farm stays

Addison County Relocalization Network (ACORN)

- Newest food hub in VT – Utilizes a shared space with Champlain Valley Office of Economic Opportunity, based in Middlebury
- Food Connects picks up product from Middlebury and gets the food to other places in the state (part of their work includes cross-docking for supplies with other food hubs)
- Important to have this local food distribution solution – offers independence and communication opportunities

- Thank you for the support to food hubs through Working Lands and Northern Borders Regional Commission grant

Beekeeping & Neonicotinoids

- Use of neonicotinoids are negatively impacting bees and other pollinators but don't improve crop yields
- Science is sharing that there are no other options
- Research and experience in the field is that the harm is great
- There are alternatives but many are not aware of them
- Would like to see VAAFM support H.706 bill – follow lead of moderate approach from New York
- Message from industry representatives has been to have Vermont bill mirror New York bill

Concern with Avian Influenza

- Very contagious and spread worldwide
- Avian Influenza (AI) detections in polar bears and penguins in Antarctica
- 800,000 poultry have been depopulated and a waste and loss of income to farmers
- We need an AI vaccination, and this needs VAAFM support and encouragement to USDA
- United States trade agreements are preventing us from selling frozen poultry if those birds have been vaccinated for AI
- Major concern about commercial operations being quarantined based on backyard flock with AI

Current Use Value vs Conservation Easement

- One is a tax benefit, and one is conservation conversation with Vermont Land Trust
- Challenge is when someone needs to take acres out of current use and swap with other acres, this doesn't work with Current Use Value program
- Question of whether parcels that were enrolled in the 1990's were exempt from the removal penalty?

Dig Deep VT campaign

- Started by concerned citizens after the 2023 growing season
- Partners include Ski VT, New England credit unions, VT Association of Broadcasters, Givio platform, VT Farm Bureau
- VAAFM has been providing data and storytelling of losses
- Campaign will likely run through July 2024
- Goal is to raise as much as possible
- Can donate to a specific county through the platform
- Once campaign is complete, then start with applications from farmers in need

Follow up process

- VAAFM team starting to go through notes and follow up
- Will capture themes of what we need to work on
- Will follow up with people regarding their specific questions
- Plan to have an outward facing report of themes in addition to sharing what was discussed during each county
- Hope this first step will continue with ongoing engagement
- We have a form online if you want to share additional feedback
- Would be great to host during not legislative session or growing season to capture legislative delegation

Farm labor

- H2A program is essential to business and slaughter activities
- Undocumented workers are also critical to farming viability

Farmworker training and safety

- PathStone program works to build family and individual self-sufficiency by strengthening farmworker, rural and urban communities. Organization is based out of St. Albans in Vermont, and is in 9 states and Puerto Rico as well
- Farmworker housing needs are incredibly high, just as for other groups of Vermonter, including those facing homelessness

- Champlain Housing Trust funding through Vermont Housing and Conservation Board (VHCB) has been important for housing repair projects in recent years
- This VHCB program also provides opportunity for building new on-farm housing
- Farms also need to build housing units off site to house farmworkers – this is happening in other states; need to do this in VT
- Housing data in VT doesn't include any farmworker housing
- Use census data to share with organizations that can use this to leverage funders to invest in farmworker housing
- Need farmworker housing committee to work on this topic to bring experts together, with the data, to take up this topic
- Look at HousingData.org for the farmworker housing data
- Example from Michigan Farm and Agriculture Housing Task Force report

Flood response

- Appreciation for VAAFMM response efforts
- Thinking about longer term funding sources for continuing need and future flood response
- Make funding more accessible and application process simpler
- Northeast Organic Farming Association (NOFA) model worked really well – 2 question application and got funding within a few days
- Connecting with crop insurance is important
- Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS) has lots of federal funding and want to get this in the hands of farmers
- Direct payments to farmers is helpful
- Also need more Technical Assistance (TA) support for farmers who are not as tech savvy
- Can VAAFMM partners help more with grant writing or application submission?
- Natural Resource Conservation Districts (NRCDDs) are also a helpful resource to help with grant writing and applications

- How can VAAFMM manage risk and accountability requirements in our granting process without putting undo burden on grantees and applicants?
- Can we explore oral grant submission?

Feels VT has been supportive of Agriculture

- Current use program provides fair tax for farmers
- No tax on farm inputs
- Phosphorus reduction efforts
- Marketing, promotion and advocacy for farmers
- Pesticide licensing and regulation
- Best Management Practices program
- Aim for VAAFMM's programs to do no harm

Inspections

- 3 commercial deer farms in VT; had been 54 in VT
- In the case of other livestock, you don't pay an inspection fee. In the case of deer and alpaca, you pay inspection fee and slaughter costs
- Could VAAFMM look at this unique treatment for deer and alpaca operations and put it in parity with other livestock – remove the inspection cost?
- There's an Epizootic Hemorrhagic Disease/blue tongue concerns in other parts of the country

Surface Water legislation

- More conversations around river corridors is needed, and is in the beginning stages
- Agency of Natural Resources (ANR) has issues 350 permits since the flood – it can be done and managed but need a conversation with ANR