

Rutland County Listening Session Notes

Date: 3/20/24

Location: Rutland, VT

Partner(s): Vermont Farmers Food Center, Poultney-Mettowee Natural Resources Conservation District (NRCD)

Attendees: 22 attendees (including VAAFM staff)

Common Acronyms

CSFO: Certified Small Farm Operation

NRCD: Natural Resource Conservation District

NRCS: Natural Resource Conservation Service

SFO: Small Farm Operation

VAAFM: Vermont Agency of Agriculture, Food, and Markets

Notes as Followed

Agri-Mark

- What is VAAFM's role in supporting Agri-Mark to not have happen what occurred with Horizon?
- Agri-Mark is holding back \$4/100 weight which is a hardship for dairy farmers
- Concern around loss of equity for farmers
- Dairy farm viability is now impacting equipment purchases
- Many farms are feeling the need for an immediate diversification plan
- Is there a role for VAAFM to help with alternative co-op models?

Campaigns and Messaging

Value of Buy Local Campaign

- Was a strong marketing and branding campaign
- Demonstrated that spending money at farmers markets and farm stands, you are keeping money in the state of Vermont

- Community say increase in local agricultural sales as a result of this messaging on buying local
- Currently feel desperation and limited pool of consumers
- People want to but can't always afford to eat local food

Food is Medicine

- Less healthy, easily accessible food is not healthy for our bodies
- Want to make food affordable to greater segment of the Vermont population
- VAAFm message the core value of agriculture: ecological, community, food security
- Want to see more marketing messaging than regulatory burden

Farmworker Support

- The Agency needs to be doing more to support farmworkers
- They are the backbone of agriculture in the State and should have more resources and support regarding their quality of life, making a livable wage and their capacity to feel safety and belonging in Vermont and their communities
- This is true for all farmworkers, but special emphasis for migrant workers, including H2A workers

Federal Regulations and Funding Opportunities

Food Safety Modernization Act (FSMA)

- Funding from United States Food and Drug Administration (FDA) and takes away sovereignty of state to make own rules
- This is in comparison to Food Sovereignty movements being talked about in other states
- Find FSMA regulations absurd in some ways for the scale and types of production in Vermont, especially

Other Federal Funding Opportunities

- America the Beautiful
- Congressional Delegation Spending request (due 3/29 to the Governor's Office) could help bridge gap seen for funding requests in past year
- USDA Regional Food System Partnership (due May 14) = planning or implementation
- Bennington County NRCD grant co-beneficiary for a chestnut processing facility in Salem New York

Other Federal Regulation

- From a service provider after the meeting: “Unharness the NMP from the NRCS 590 Standard for those farms that are using goCrop in regards to requiring the NMP to be signed off on by a NRCS TSP. According to the USDA Find a TSP website, there are 8 TSP’s registered to work in VT. Of that 8, 5 are from out of state. The argument that a NMP is a cost of doing business is unjustified when a farm is milking 65-75 cows on a crop land base of 250+ acres.”
 - Rule of thumb is 1 acre of crop land per animal is needed for manure application, aside from that the soil test tells the story of what is happening.
 - In a time when smaller farms are struggling to make ends meet, any financial and regulatory burden that can be lifted from the farming community is a boon to that community.
 - A farm will still need to work with either NRCS, VACD or their local district to have the RUSLE2 erosion calculation and basic maps completed if this were to happen

Land Access and Conservation Conversations

- Dairy farmers are going out and land base feels vulnerable
- Worry about land being managed by New York farmers and not their best operations
 - This trend is happening in Bennington County
- Vermont Required Agricultural Practices resources are being shared in Washington County New York
 - What is AAFM strategy to discuss how to address this scenario?
- Need to differentiate between farming and mining/extreme extraction
- Land is leased when they are not engaged in the agricultural community

Neonicotinoid Bill

Concerns around neonicotinoid bill and not having a replacement

- Worry that the Vermont and New York seed market is not enough for research and development
- Can VAAFAM proactively inform the agricultural community around safe alternatives options for practices other than the need for neonicotinoid treated seeds?
- Some aren’t feeling confident with recommendation from petrochemical companies
- Can VAAFAM connect community members with legislators to speak with about specific bills?

Priorities of VAAFAM and this Listening Session Series

Questions surrounding what the Vermont Agency of Agriculture, Food, and Markets expectations of these listening sessions

- Space for ideas and concerns to be heard by the State of Vermont
- Build a better system for how farmers, processors, community members can reach us

What are the VAAFM priorities?

- Supportive of all types of agriculture
- Not new initiatives, instead maintain what we already do well
- Listen and learn from the industry
- Fiscally conservative time where we are not adding new programs
- Agriculture is not represented in budget and policy conversations this session
- When was VAAFM founded?
- What is the VAAFM mission statement?

Regulatory Structures and Relationships with NRCDs and NRCS

- VAAFM feels more removed from on-the-ground support staff
- NRCDs & NRCS are very well-known entities to the farmers
- There is a difference between VAAFM staff and these local organizations

Regulatory structure

- Would like to see regulatory structure from State of Vermont rather than federal government
- Would like to see VAAFM to think independently from the federal regulatory structure in ways that better fit the dynamics of our state
- Model like Maine has done

New Strategy of VAAFM Inspection Team

- NRCDs like that VAAFM is considering sending a letter to farms who are scheduled for an inspection
- Recommend publishing in Agriview when the Certified Small Farm Operation (CSFO) inspections are planned

What percent of resources and time go into regulatory efforts?

- Oftentimes NRCD programs and staff are connected to federal resources
- See NRCS for the federal support providing on the ground support

Economic viability of farms is a concern

- Increasing communications between NRCS and VAAFM is desired
- More regional partnership meetings which allows for more open discussions about how to serve producers
 - Important to see these discussions happen at the 'zone level', impact field staff, and not just at the state office and leadership level
- Want to ensure that plans and recommendation make their way to the local level for implementation

State and federal funding allocation

- Small farmers have often feel left out of the NRCS ranking process – local fund pools can be helpful

VAAFM & Federal Grants & Programs

Does VAAFM track the success of granting programs?

- Thinking specifically about meat slaughter and processing grants and whether they were impactful
- Sharing of over subscription of economic development programs – important Key Performance Indicator (KPI) of need and importance of agriculture
- How address the 600+ applicants that submitted proposals to Agricultural Development and economic development programs and were denied
- Farmers would benefit from more sustained programming so as not required to tweak or pivots to programs not offered annually
- Increase the FAP payments – The cheapest place certified seed was found was \$16 for a 50-pound bag, so most farmers are looking at \$24-32 an acre for seed costs plus the cost of fuel
- Crop to Hay could easily increase to \$55-\$65 an acre and have a stipulation that it has to remain a hay crop for 4-5 years. This could be a tiered approach and depending on how long its seeded down will drive the payment rate (3-5 years, 4-6 years, etc.)
- Add NMP (nutrient management plan) update funding – In previous times, this was a cost share item through VAAFM
 - ☞ As costs increase in soil test and manure and compost testing, any cost share from the state would benefit farmers
 - ☞ This could also serve as a way to see who has an NMP on the CSFO and SFO sized farms

- ∅ A basic soil test through Dairy One is \$9.25, Basic Plus is \$15.50, and Manure and Compost is \$43; through UVM soil test is \$17 and Manure and compost is \$45
- Add Liming cost share availability
 - ∅ Seeing many soil tests on long term and permanent hay where the pH is mid to upper 5's.
 - For many farms the trucking cost for lime is beyond the reach of the farm
 - Proper pH is incredibly important for healthy crops, good nutrient updates, and overall soil health
 - Trucking costs are in the ballpark of \$20 a ton