

Listening Session Online Feedback Form Notes

Date: Entries range from 12/4/23 - 4/4/24

Location: Virtual

Partner(s): None

Attendees: *11 entries were recorded from individuals who could not or did not wish to attend another meeting, there were also many folks who came to a meeting but wished to share more. These notes have been transcribed directly from the feedback form, with the exception of edits made where needed to provide context or clarity.*

Notes in this document are presented in two ways:

Section 1: *Organized by theme (as consistent with other sets), with the individual's county included if given, and*

Section 2: *Organized by county within the questions that were asked (second half of document). Four questions, in bold, were offered as prompts via the form.*

Common Acronyms

ACCD: Agency of Commerce and Community Development

AHS: Agency of Human Services

ANR: Agency of Natural Resources

AOE: Agency of Education

BMP: Best Management Practices (program)

DBIC: Dairy Business Innovation Center

FAP: Farm Agronomic Practices (program)

NRCD: Natural Resource Conservation District

NRCS: Natural Resource Conservation Service

RAP: Required Agricultural Practices

VAAFMM: Vermont Agency of Agriculture, Food, and Markets

VACC: Vermont Agricultural Credit Corporation

VEDA: Vermont Economic Development Authority

VPFP: Vermont Pay for Performance (program)

Section 1:

Responses organized by theme, with the county of the individual who submitted it (if given).

Notes as Followed

Dairy

- (Orleans) During the listening session the Vermont Milk Brand was discussed. This has been attempted in the past and ultimately failed. Perhaps we could look at why that failed and if there is a way to learn from the attempt. Vermont already has the kinds of farms that are worth marketing to consumers. Farms that practice in ways that are good for the environment, the animals, the ultimate nutrition of the product and the Vermont Landscape.
- (Orleans) Agency of Ag needs to think economies of scale - the dairy farmers are the ones who own the land, pay the property taxes and keep the working landscape open and viable. The Agency needs to decide if that is the priority or not.
- (Orleans) Replacing dairy farmers with smaller scale, alternative ag will not necessarily replace that gross revenue traditional dairy is providing. It will have a ripple effect the loss of those farms shows us that already. And if traditional dairy is not the way the state wants to go what are the viable economic alternatives that allow farmers to maintain that land and all the costs that entails.

Equity Work

- (Rutland) I appreciate all the equity work being done and want to encourage the Agency of Agriculture to keep up the good work as there is always plenty to be done to increase equity.

Grants

- (Windsor) Grant programs for those that were effected by the FREEZE on May 17-18, 2023.
 - (Orleans) Simplify grant applications and reporting for farms requiring subsidy to operate. Provide a database showing all available grants in one place and organized by business/farm/institution opportunities. If there is a genuine interest in preserving small dairy farms, expand programs to support those farmers directly.
- (Orleans) I think workshops on accessing grants for the "lay farmer", without having to pay a grant writer to navigate the often complex process would be helpful. More than just the informational sessions you offer.

- (Orleans) Use grant monies efficiently so more of it actually goes to the farmers / partners supporting them.
- (Orleans) The NRCS office in Newport is so helpful in navigating and applying for grant opportunities.
 - (Orleans) Additionally the support provided to make sure the farm is in compliance and up to date with all record keeping is essential to operations and farm strategy. The local office means farms have support from professionals who understand the community and have a more direct connection to the farm.
- (Chittenden) maple grants; hope for more each year
- (Orleans) I think the Agency of Ag should think of leveraging its grant monies to help maintain the existing farming infrastructure.
- (Orleans) All the grants are for "new, innovative, etc". and honestly farmers are just trying to break even and maybe take a meager salary for once. It sends a message that farmers are not innovative or already doing things well. And if you are there is no financial recognition for already having done that.
- (Orleans) With the rising costs of everything, matching funds from the farmer should be on a sliding scale. Small farms just can't manage the match sometimes because we just don't have the cash flow.
- (Orleans) Grants etc should be reflective of the economic impact that farm has on its local economy, ie a 150 cow dairy farm creates a gross revenue of nearly 1 million dollars that supports local economy through jobs, supporting local vendors etc.
- (Orleans) The amount of grants available to those farms should reflect that. ie \$5000 for a local CSA/fruit and veggie farmer that has a gross annual revenue of \$100,000 vs \$5000 in support to a dairy farmer (ie the DMC reimbursement) who has a gross revenue of \$1000000, it doesn't even equate.

Inspection and Regulation (VAAF)

- (Orleans) Don't have inspectors titles and roles be anything besides inspectors. Having coordinate services is confusing especially when other organizations do that work.
- (Anonymous) We wish all agencies were more on the same page for regulations.
- (Orleans) Eric Perkins and Deb Durkee-Barnett are supportive inspectors. In addition to confirming production and processing meet state standards they are both valuable resources when working to get to the bottom of issues or challenges that present in the farm or the plant.
- (Franklin) I've noticed: more listening and less defensive posture; meeting farmers where they are; recognition of the intersectionality of factors that make farming profitable (health insurance, mental health, child care, housing and more contribute to making a farm and farmers families thrive); increased partnerships and collaborations

Legislation

- (Windsor) There was supposed to be a Bill to help frozen farms. Not sure where that stands.

Requests of VAAF

- (Chittenden) an economic study of the VT Christmas Tree industry. It lacks recognition of just how valuable it is to the State
- (Franklin) Offer more personable help to each farmer with assistance needed for grant writing and to facilitate the needs for each
- (Franklin) lead a multi-agency (ANR, ACCD, AOE, AHS, Fish and Wildlife, Historic Preservation and more!) collaboration to reframe, support and organize a Vermont Farm Show that celebrates all of the facets of the industry.
- (Anonymous) I think trying to educate to our public and legislature more on what we are actually doing on our operations to help improve our water quality and fight climate change. Super challenging but seems more important than ever

Support for Farmers

Financial

- (Orleans) Financial incentives (use an incentive based on production so its a scaled incentive) to participate in things like this go a long way and would match your agency goals also.
- (Windsor) Loans do not help when there is little or no income to pay them back. And there were no loans offered to frozen farmers AND if there were, we could not access them as the criteria was limiting or they didn't exist.
- (Anonymous) I'd love to see organic produce farmers rewarded financially for their commitment to sustainable agriculture.
- (Orleans) Canada subsidizes interest rates for ag loans, I think this is something that could be looked at closer, through VACC/ VEDA, buy down the rates so farmers are not always under water and unable to catch up.
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Land/Capital

- (Rutland) Front of mind for me is access to land for agricultural endeavors.

General

- (Orleans) I think that the Agency of Ag could acknowledge the good work many farmers are already voluntarily doing in terms of climate change mitigation ie through the Caring Dairy Program (Ben and Jerry's) - through that we have actually already been looking at Nutrient Mass Balance through Cornell University - we have 8 years data already and have been looking at our Carbon Footprint and measuring that through the Cool Farm Tool for years also.

- (Orleans) We participate with Migrant Justice and Milk with Dignity to support equity and livable wages for our workers. Maybe more widespread support of existing efforts rather than duplicate and recreate the wheel.
- (Chittenden) any help in any area that makes us better at what we do
- (Anonymous) I'd also like to see the Agency of Agriculture support a state-wide ban on glyphosate. This toxic chemical affects us all. Just look at the lawsuits that have been successful against the manufacturers of RoundUp/Glyphosate. The Green Mountain State should do better on this topic. We're known for being healthier than most places but this idea of "no till" chemically based agriculture does not make sense. There is an organic version of no till that should be supported and enhanced. Phasing out all of the toxic pesticides should be priority number one for the Agency and the state.
- (Anonymous) It's my understanding that glyphosate binds with the phosphate in the soil and carries it out to the waterways encouraging toxic algae blooms.
<https://access.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.2134/csa2019.64.0103>
- (Anonymous) More outreach and more grants.
- (Franklin) Farm to table - We would like someone to talk to about helping us engage in this program
- (Orleans) It seems impossible to turn the tide of what is happening to small dairy farms in Vermont. However, if there are enough smart people who care and are motivated to save the strongest of the small Vermont dairy farms, the goal is attainable.

VAAFM & Federal Programs

- (Orleans) An example of such duplication is the use of Farm Prep for the VFPF - the state put money into the development of GoCrop through UVM nearly 10 years ago, which many farmers buy and use to manage their NMPs, now we have to also use Farm Prep - the systems don't "talk" to each other so the state is paying technical advisors to data enter for VFPF, why not work with GoCrop to develop a side by side platform to implement the VFPF with existing technology the state has already paid to develop. That would support UVMs work and be easier for farmers to adopt and use without paying technical advisors.
- (Franklin) VAAFM can grow VT agriculture by: favoring direct marketing, allowing tiered/ scale appropriate regulations, creating and supporting land access programs for next generation farmers and the historically denied, re-write/strengthen the RAPS particularly to require/mandate crop rotations on annual crop land to increase water holding and controlling (run off) capacity.
- Engagement with individual current farms could be enhanced to support farmers
- (Anonymous) (what could be done better)
 - Maybe support within facilities too to improve cow comfort, more energy/labor efficient stuff. Like some help towards robotic feed pushers or improved parlors

that are all more efficient per lb of milk. Understand they're limitations but just some ideas.

- As far as climate mitigation maybe strategies to reduce feed shrink. Improved storage, feed inoculant type programs
- (Rutland) Organic Certification Cost Share Program is so great and really helps organic farms like the one I work on.
- (Orleans) Yes DBIC and BMP programs are great
- (Orleans) Helping reimburse Dairy Margin Program was helpful.
- (Orleans) VPFPP program is a great idea, but very hard to navigate and understand without the technical assistance support from local conservation districts, so a lot of the cash ear marked for this is paying for that support, not going to the farmer doing the actual work and tracking of that data.
- (Anonymous) I think VPFPP was helpful for us. It has helped us show others how much we have improved through new management practices.
- (Anonymous) We did FAP which has helped us to try new practices and absorb initial costs. This really helped us improve our soil quality over the last several years.
- (Anonymous) Farmers don't have a lot of time, help us with admin.
- (Orleans) Don't hire a program's navigator. Support the current role of NRCDs to service that

Section 2:

Responses organized by question prompt (in bold), and county of the individual who submitted it (if given).

Notes as Followed:

In what ways can the Agency of Agriculture improve on its work? This could include outreach, equity, grant programs, engagement with climate change mitigation, community involvement, etc.

- Windsor County Orchard:
 - Grant programs for those that were effected by the FREEZE on May 17-18, 2023.
 - Loans do not help when there is little or no income to pay them back. And there were no loans offered to frozen farmers AND if there were, we could not access them as the criteria was limiting or they didn't exist.
- Rutland County farm-hand:
 - I appreciate all the equity work being done and want to encourage the Agency of Agriculture to keep up the good work as there is always plenty to be done to increase equity. Front of mind for me is access to land for agricultural endeavors.
- Orleans County Producers (3):
 - Don't have inspectors titles and roles be anything besides inspectors. Having coordinate services is confusing especially when other organizations do that work.
 - Simplify grant applications and reporting for farms requiring subsidy to operate. Provide a database showing all available grants in one place and organized by business/farm/institution opportunities. If there is a genuine interest in preserving small dairy farms, expand programs to support those farmers directly.
 - I think workshops on accessing grants for the "lay farmer", without having to pay a grant writer to navigate the often complex process would be helpful.
 - More than just the informational sessions you offer.
 - I think that the Agency of Ag could acknowledge the good work many farmers are already voluntarily doing in terms of climate change mitigation ie through the Caring Dairy Program (Ben and Jerry's) - through that we have actually already been looking at Nutrient Mass Balance through Cornell University - we have 8 years data already and have been looking at our Carbon Footprint and measuring that through the Cool Farm Tool for years also.
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- Financial incentives (use an incentive based on production so its a scaled incentive) to participate in things like this go a long way and would match your agency goals also.
- An example of such duplication is the use of Farm Prep for the VPFP - the state put money into the development of GoCrop through UVM nearly 10 years ago, which many farmers buy and use to manage their NMPs, now we have to also use Farm Prep - the systems don't " talk" to each other so the state is paying technical advisors to data enter for VPFP, why not work with GoCrop to develop a side by side platform to implement the VPFP with existing technology the state has already paid to develop. That would support UVMs work and be easier for farmers to adopt and use without paying technical advisors.
- Use grant monies efficiently so more of it actually goes to the farmers / partners supporting them.
- Chittenden County Producer:
 - any help in any area that makes us better at what we do
- Franklin County Producers (2):
 - Engagement with individual current farms
 - VAAFM can grow VT agriculture by: favoring direct marketing, allowing tiered/ scale appropriate regulations, creating and supporting land access programs for next generation farmers and the historically denied, re-write/strengthen the RAPs particularly to require/mandate crop rotations on annual crop land to increase water holding and controlling (run off) capacity.
- Anonymous (3):
 - I'd love to see organic produce farmers rewarded financially for their commitment to sustainable agriculture.
 - I'd also like to see the Agency of Agriculture support a state-wide ban on glyphosate. This toxic chemical affects us all. Just look at the lawsuits that have been successful against the manufacturers of RoundUp/Glyphosate. The Green Mountain State should do better on this topic. We're known for being healthier than most places but this idea of "no till" chemically based agriculture does not make sense. There is an organic version of no till that should be supported and enhanced. Phasing out all of the toxic pesticides should be priority number one for the Agency and the state.
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- Maybe support within facilities too to improve cow comfort, more energy/labor efficient stuff. Like some help towards robotic feed pushers or improved parlors that are all more efficient per lb of milk. Understand they're limitations but just some ideas.

Are there any programs, outreach, or work that the Agency of Agriculture has done over the past year that have been supportive to you or your community?

- Windsor County:
 - There was supposed to be a Bill to help frozen farms. Not sure where that stands.
- Rutland County:
 - Organic Certification Cost Share Program is so great and really helps organic farms like the one I work on.
- Orleans County:
 - Yes DBIC and BMP programs are great
 - Eric Perkins and Deb Durkee-Barnett are supportive inspectors. In addition to confirming production and processing meet state standards they are both valuable resources when working to get to the bottom of issues or challenges that present in the farm or the plant.
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- Chittenden:
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- Franklin:
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- I've noticed: more listening and less defensive posture; meeting farmers where they are; recognition of the intersectionality of factors that make farming profitable (health insurance, mental health, child care, housing and more contribute to making a farm and farmers families thrive); increased partnerships and collaborations
- Anonymous:
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 - We did FAP which has helped us to try new practices and absorb initial costs. This really helped us improve our soil quality over the last several years.
 - Farmers don't have a lot of time, help us with admin.

Do you have any other comments for how the Agency of Agriculture can better support Vermont's agricultural sectors?

- Windsor
 - No
- Rutland
 - No
- Orleans
 - Don't hire a program's navigator. Support the current role of NRCDs to service that need locally.
 - During the listening session the Vermont Milk Brand was discussed. This has been attempted in the past and ultimately failed. Perhaps we could look at why that failed and if there is a way to learn from the attempt. Vermont already has the kinds of farms that are worth marketing to consumers. Farms that practice in ways that are good for the environment, the animals, the ultimate nutrition of the product and the Vermont Landscape.
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- Chittenden
 - an economic study of the VT Christmas Tree industry. It lacks recognition of just how valuable it is to the State
- Franklin
 - Offer more personable help to each farmer with assistance needed for grant writing and to facilitate the needs for each
 - lead a multi-agency (ANR, ACCD, AOE, AHS, Fish and Wildlife, Historic Preservation and more!) collaboration to reframe, support and organize a Vermont Farm Show that celebrates all of the facets of the industry.
- Anonymous
 - I think trying to educate to our public and legislature more on what we are actually doing on our operations to help improve our water quality and fight climate change. Super challenging but seems more important than ever.