



Vermont Land Trust

CONSERVING LAND FOR THE FUTURE OF VERMONT

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FARMLAND ACCESS

THE ISSUE

As the land changes hands, Vermont's landscape and economy may change as well. Keeping land in agricultural use will protect the character of our state and provide food and products that enhance the economic vitality and quality of life in our communities.

The good news is that there are skilled farmers looking for their first farms in Vermont. They're searching for places to build businesses—from traditional dairy and maple sugaring operations to businesses that produce vegetables, fruit, meat, fiber, and cheese.

The challenge for these farmers comes down to access: finding land that works for their business and that is also affordable.

"Over the next 10 to 20 years, over one-quarter of Vermont farmers are likely to exit farming. The 363,645 acres they manage and \$1.2 billion in land and agricultural infrastructure they own will change hands in one way or another."

—American Farmland Trust
"Keeping Farmers on the Land," January 2016

Preserving and Strengthening Agriculture

The Vermont Land Trust's Farmland Access Program is the link between beginning farmers ready to own their own land (or current farmers looking to expand their acreage) and farms in transition.

VLT provides technical assistance to both farm buyers and sellers in various ways. We work with farm sellers to find the right farmers to buy their land. We also connect buyers with the expertise they need to be successful owner-operators, including advice on creating a solid business plan.

Most importantly, we purchase development rights using a legal tool called a conservation easement. When farmers sell a conservation easement to us at the same time the farm changes hands, the price of the land is effectively reduced. Not only is the farm affordable and protected from future development, but by including a special clause in the easement, called an Option to Purchase at Agricultural Value, we ensure that future buyers will be farmers and the land will stay in production.

In some situations, such as when there is an immediate threat of losing a farm to development, it makes sense for VLT to purchase a farm outright before looking for new farmers. When this happens, we request proposals from interested buyers who submit business plans for consideration. The selected farmer then purchases the farm or enters into a lease-to-own agreement.

Protecting Natural Resources

High quality agricultural land is often located in floodplains and many farms have forested land as well. Depending on a farm's characteristics, the conservation easement will be designed to protect important resources such as rivers, wetlands, and rare habitats, or require management plans for working forests.

Easement Stewardship

Easements exist in perpetuity. This means that VLT staff visit each property regularly to make sure that the conservation easement is upheld and to be available to the farmer as a resource for land management questions.



"What's at stake isn't just conservation and business interests, but the future of farming in Vermont. Great farmland is a prime target for development, particularly land near water. Protecting our landscape for the future—ensuring that it's always available and affordable to farmers—is critical to the long-term viability of agriculture in the state."

—Tracy Zschau
Conservation Director
Vermont Land Trust

People Make All the Difference

The Vermont Housing & Conservation Board provides funding to purchase individual farmland conservation easements, with matching funds usually coming from the federal USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service. Often, town conservation funds and local citizens will help to bridge the funding gap on projects in their communities.

But the essential work of ensuring access to affordable farmland, both now and for the future, comes down to people.

VLT staff invest their time (two years per project is not unusual) with farm owners, buyers and their families, appraisers, attorneys, and local communities. They use their technical and legal expertise to solve problems and innovate.

Their work is funded through the generosity of those who make charitable gifts each year: people who believe in helping the next generation of farmers, keeping Vermont farms productive, and supporting farm innovation and the agricultural economy. Sometimes generous farmland owners donate their land to VLT, which in turn conserves and transfers the land to a qualified farmer.

Jennifer and Spencer's Story

Ten years ago, Jennifer and Spencer Blackwell were the first people to buy a farm through the Farmland Access Program—the Elmer Farm in Middlebury. After years of leasing land, it was a dream come true. It was a life-changing time, during which they married and had a child. Their farm now produces 35 different organic vegetables, plus herbs, grains, and flowers. They have 125 CSA members, and their family has grown to three children.



“The Farmland Access Program was an incredible opportunity for us. We’ve exceeded all our expectations.”

—Jennifer Blackwell
Farmer, Middlebury, VT

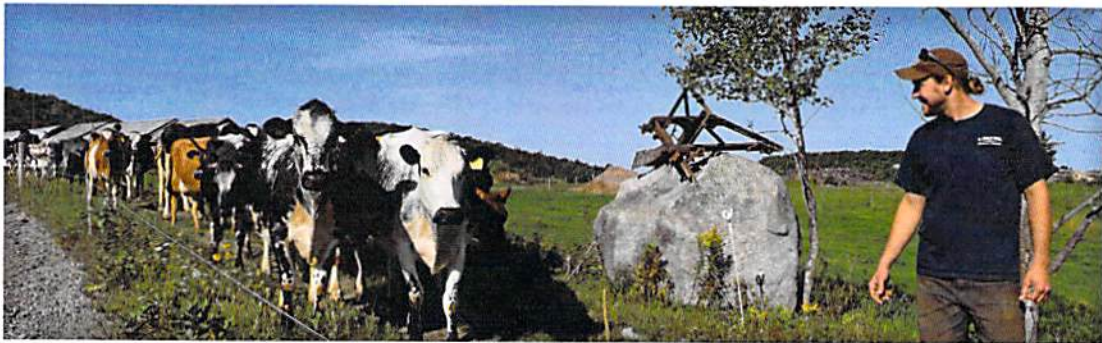
OUR VISION

Our work is to help farmers with growing businesses transition to land ownership. We must consider expanding our program to include additional farm incubation, multi-farmer production models, business planning, and bridge financing.

Recently, VLT created a new pool of capital devoted to reacting quickly and flexibly to opportunities to buy key land. This funding allows us to hold onto a farm while we find a new farmer. It also gives us more flexibility to offer lease-to-purchase opportunities.

VLT is leading the national conversation within the land trust community about farmland access and support for new and beginning farmers. This year, we are co-hosting a National Young Farmers Coalition conference in Vermont, creating the opportunity to share learning with peer organizations across the country. And, in an effort to continually improve the Farmland Access Program, we are partnering with the Vermont Housing and Conservation Board to conduct a formal evaluation of enterprise health for participating farm businesses.

We can't do this work alone. Our work exists within a system of farmers, service providers, lenders, entrepreneurs, mentors, and communities. In partnership, we are protecting Vermont's agricultural land and character. ♦



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