# Vermont Soil Health and Payment for Ecosystem Services (PES)

# Working Group

Williston, Vermont

December 16, 2019

DRAFT Meeting Summary

## Next steps

* AAFM will post meeting materials, webinar recordings, and the November meeting summary to the website.
* CBI will revise the draft report per comments from the WG and develop a draft budget proposal for WG review at the January meeting

## Overview

The Working Group’s discussion focused on refining the draft interim report to the legislature and brainstorming a prospective workplan for continued efforts into 2020.

## NOFA-VT Farmer Survey

Maddie Kempner, NOFA-VT, shared preliminary results of a survey of farmers in the state that she and a small group developed to gain input from small-scale farmers whose interests NOFA represents on the Working Group. Maddie identified the most common themes that arose from the survey responses, including encouraging pasture/perennial forage, ensuring financial viability for farmers, supporting small-scale farming, improving clean water, and reducing nutrient and pesticide inputs into the system. The preliminary results indicated substantial engagement and interest in the topic of PES among farmers, and also the need for more education about PES concepts. All Working Group members had the opportunity to circulate the survey to their networks. Because most respondents were engaged through NOFA and the Vermont Healthy Soils Coalition’s networks, the respondents were primarily from small, diversified farms.

### Comments and discussion

* Group members were interested in extending an invitation to the survey to a larger and broader community of farmers. The group agreed to keep the survey open and give an opportunity for more responses to be gathered.
* Group members cautioned against extrapolating too much from the survey in the absence of any other community engagement information, since the survey was not conducted scientifically and the responses were not a representative sample.
* The group expressed interest in potentially doing a more rigorous, scientific survey in the future.

## Revising the draft interim report to the legislature

Much of the meeting was focused on Working Group members providing input a draft of the interim report to the legislature. This feedback is captured in the revision to the report circulated before the January 9, 2020 meeting.

## Public comment

Several members of the public made comments, including suggestions for revisions of the report:

* Phil Huffman, The Nature Conservancy: the charge to the Working Group from the Legislature reinforces the point made in discussions here that soil health is an important factor, but not the only item on which this group should focus. Additionally, it may be helpful for the report to articulate key principles for what a PES program needs to include on which this group agrees, such as outcomes rather than practices, voluntariness, additionality, quantifiability, verifiability, durable outcomes, and others. A clear definition of soil health should be provided. Notably absent from the Working Group is a representative from the environmental/NGO community. The Nature Conservancy may be a useful addition to these discussions. The concept of a pilot effort in the short term coupled with a longer effort to build a full strategy seems wise.
* Abbey Willard, VAAFM:
  + it is helpful to distinguish between two phases being discussed: one focused on buying community benefits such as flood protection for local infrastructure, and the other focused on investing in a functional landscape. An additional, softer value benefit of reputation- and relationship-building is not yet captured in these discussions.
  + The Working Group should look to national opportunities, such as the Ecosystem Services Markets Consortium’s announcement of plans to invest in new areas. If Vermont made a small investment to serve as the match to unlock that investment, it could be very valuable.
* Graham Unangst-Rufenacht, Rural Vermont: the emphasis on natural or soil capital should be framed in terms of landscape function. The framing as investment rather than payments is also important. More investigation of what can and cannot be measured is needed. This report needs to explain that a PES system will not be a silver bullet for the larger economic issues hurting farmers. More thought is needed on how to bring this conversation to farmers and watershed groups.
* Andrew Davis, NOFA: more in-depth reflection is needed on why current programs are not sufficient. Look to the models created in other states such as the watershed ag council in New council in New York State, where investments were made in ecosystem services to save money on water treatment. Community organizations should be involved more to allow investment in natural resources. Perhaps the state could create a matching program to make it easier to invest in ag quality.
* Chris Kopman, Newtrient: Advanced models are not simply paying for practices. Payment for practices uses a formula of x dollars tied to y acres of z practice, etc. With a sophisticated model, payments are tied to quantified outcomes, such as nutrient retention or carbon sequestered.
* Jon Winsten: Pilot testing will be essential to get precise information and uncover important questions. Consider options to pay both for transformation of the landscape and more minor improvements via tweaks to management in the short term. The uptake my farmers may be significantly lower is the only option for participating is in a “transformation” effort.

## Working Group Attendees

1. Jill Arace
2. Paul Doton
3. Vicky Drew
4. Alyson Eastman
5. Nancy Everhart
6. Eric Howe
7. Brian Kemp
8. Maddie Kempner
9. Didi Pershouse
10. Chuck Ross
11. Marli Rupe
12. Tyler Webb