# Vermont Payment for Ecosystem Services and Soil Health Working Group

Summary of Meeting #20: January 18, 2022

More detailed information, including presentation slides and the meeting recording can be found at <https://agriculture.vermont.gov/pes>

## Introduction

The Payment for Ecosystem Services (PES) and Soil Health Working Group held its twentieth meeting on January 18, 2022. The objectives of the meeting were for the group to learn about the California Healthy Soils Program, discuss measurement and assessment in program design, and receive updates from the technical team.

## Summary of discussion

Elizabeth Hessom, Nina Bingham, and Amrith Gunasekara from the California Department of Food and Agriculture Office of Environmental Farming & Innovation gave a presentation on the California Healthy Soils Program (HSP). They shared a background to the program along with key program design elements of program’s two components. The HSP Incentives Program provides financial assistance of up to $100,000 to farmers and ranchers who implement conservation management practices that improve soil health, sequester carbon, and otherwise reduce greenhouse gas emissions. HSP Demonstration Projects showcase farmers and ranchers’ implementation of HSP practices, providing awards for collecting GHG data and outreach. As of November 1, 2021, the HSP had 481 active grants under the Incentives Program and 54 active demonstration projects. A key insight was that the program effectively pays participants for outcomes by allowing them to estimate greenhouse gas reductions from their implemented practices and paying them based on those reductions. Presentation slides are available at <https://agriculture.vermont.gov/pes>.

Afterward, Jon Winsten shared the latest results from the survey on program design options. While there were a range of views expressed, two key insights were that technical assistance should be offered to participants and that a program should offer payments for either/both improvements and meeting a threshold level. He plans follow up individually with respondents. He then shared a new survey focused on incorporating biodiversity into a program and determining payment rates based on conservation efforts. The goal is to begin to get an idea of the overall cost for a program.

Alissa White shared updates on the technical team’s activities over the next couple months. The current focus is on stakeholder engagement, and activities will include a survey with farmers, along with follow-up interviews and focus groups. The focus group will also consider alternative forms of compensation, about which Heather Darby will follow up with the Working Group. The team will also employ a ‘snowball’ approach to develop tools and approaches (by starting with what is known, then performing SWOT and gap analyses to develop further questions and answers).

## Public Comment

Stephen Leslie commented that the California HSP is largely funded through the state’s cap-and-trade program. He inquired whether proposals were on the table for Vermont to look at a cap-and-trade program while requiring that polluting industries reduce carbon emissions over a given period. Ryan Patch replied that the Vermont Climate Council considered cap-and-trade under its Projects, Pathways, and Actions framework and recommended that the Governor and Legislature examine a broad range of funding opportunities.

The meeting was adjourned at 2 PM.