A forum on the future of Vermont's working landscape points to progress, problems

Written by Joel Banner Baird Free Press Staff Writer
Dec. 20, 2013 |

burlingtonfreepress.com

- -Loren Cox a lead carpenter at Shelburne Museum, fixes a bearing in a 1991 reconstructed waterwheel at the Museum Monday. The Middle-ages era water wheel is part of an up and down sawmill exhibit. The wheel is constructed with white oak and red cedar which holds up well under wet conditions. shot Monday, September 20, 1999

See the future?

An ongoing forum on the future of Vermont's working landscape takes place online at the Vermont Council of Working Development: www.vtworkinglands.org

The low-hanging jargon lifted quickly.

By the end of the day Tuesday, the dozens of folk who gathered in Randolph to mull the future of Vermont's rural economy had boiled the conundrum down to two words: "work" and "land."

Participants began with an ample earful more: "Working group." "Action plan." "Enterprise fund." "Steering committee." "Partnership." "Leverage."

Luckily, translators were in abundance at the second annual Summit on the Future of Vermont's Working Landscape.

They traced the course of apples-to-cider; beans-to-soup. Oak-to-tables; grain-to-baked goodness. Berries-to-pies. Grass-to-world-class cheese.

And they hoped to secure a trajectory for more young men and women into seasoned apprentices and business owners.

Young entrepreneurs can (and must) be encouraged to pioneer new, "cool" ways to raise and harvest livestock, timber and crops, said Vermont Council on Rural Development Executive Director Paul Costello, whose organization helped mobilize more than 500 people and 200 groups to do just that.

The average age of a farmer or logger in Vermont is about 55, the council reported this year. Forestland owners clock in, on average, about a decade older.

"We've got to work harder to re-seed Vermont for the future," Costello told the large crowd.

This year's summit celebrated the first crop of beneficiaries. A fund created last year by the Legislature — after much advance groundwork — awarded $988,730 in 36 matching grants to promising start-ups and established businesses poised to expand.

A binding theme among the recipients: more imaginative (and attentive) land use will reinvigorate Vermont's further-flung communities.

A forum on the future of Vermont's working landscape points to progress, problems

Written by Joel Banner Baird Free Press Staff Writer
Dec. 20, 2013 |

burlingtonfreepress.com

By mid-morning, a quandry emerged: Is local fuel-pellet production preferable to out-of-state natural gas?

Absolutely, Mary Martin of Cornwall told the assembly, and she asked for help in stopping the advance of a pipeline toward her farm.

Water quality, particularly in Lake Champlain, simmered as an issue at a smaller forum.

Concerns had flared earlier this month in response to a report by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, which traces about 54 percent of Vermont’s phosphorus pollution in the lake to farms and forests.

Developed land, coupled with wastewater treatment plants, accounts for about 17 percent.

Beyond statistics and good intentions, the hour-long discussion of options for improved policy remained murky.

Jill Arace, the executive director of the Vermont Association of Conservation Districts, said the shift away from a “produce more, faster” business model for farms — one that sidelines long-term interests — is likely to remain painful awhile longer.

The public at large, she added, might do well to question how it values “ecosystem services” such as flood prevention, provided by farms.

Roger Rainville, a Highgate Center dairy farmer and board chairman of the Franklin and Grand Isle Farmers’ Watershed Alliance, outlined another underlying challenge: “Farmers are always working on the edge.”

Technically, water pollution from farms is do-able, Rainville added, because farmers in the watershed that supplies New York City with water have succeeded.

All it took was public awareness, public policy and money.

Bill Howland, who manages the Grand Isle-based nonprofit Lake Champlain Basin Program, urged all Vermonters, rural and urban, to shift their engines out of neutral.

“I don’t want to see farms going out of business because they’re stuck with the bill,” Howland said. “We all eat food; we all create waste. We all have habits that could be improved.”

Colleen Goodridge, co-owner of Albany-based Goodridge Lumber, said upgrades to her business have benefited local loggers, truckers, foresters, mill operators and woodworkers.

“We’re a strange group, those of us who work the land.” Goodridge said. “But we do have the passion.”

Several panelists noted that, however “natural,” the working landscape is bound to butt heads with environmental standards and liveable-wage concerns.