



Vermont's Working Landscape
Investing in our Farm and Forest Future

The Action Plan of the Vermont Working Landscape Partnership



Table of Contents

Executive Summary	2
Introduction	4
The Vermont Working Landscape Partnership	6
The Hopes and Values of Vermonters	7
Working Landscape Partnership Principles	8
Vermont's Working Landscape Premises	9
Barriers and Challenges to the Future of the Working Landscape in Vermont	10
Trends for the Future of Vermont's Working Landscape	13
Goals for a Vermont Working Landscape Policy	17
Action Elements	18



The Action Plan of the Vermont Working Landscape Partnership

VERMONT WORKING LANDSCAPE COUNCIL

VCRD appointed the Working Landscape Council to serve as the leadership team to represent the Vermont Working Landscape Partnership and charged it to complete this action plan and lead the campaign for its implementation.

MEMBERS OF THE COUNCIL INCLUDE:

Bob Ackland, VCRD Board, Recreation Development Consultant
Cliff Allard, Allard Lumber Company
Roger Allbee, Retired Secretary of Agriculture
Marie Audet, Blue Spruce Farm
Deb Brighton, Natural Resource Economist
Greg Brown, VCRD Board, Retired Regional and State Planning Leader
India Burnett Farmer, Northeast Vine Supply & RAFFL
Peter Condaxis, Ryegate Power Station
Jacques Couture, Couture's Maple Shop / B&B
Allison Hooper, VT Butter and Cheese Creamery
Andrew Kehler, Cellars at Jasper Hill
Gil Livingston, Vermont Land Trust
John Meyer, Bardill Land and Lumber Company
Robin Scheu, Addison County Economic Development Corp.
Michael Snyder, Commissioner, Forests, Parks, and Recreation
Will Stevens, Golden Russet Farm

Paul Costello, VCRD Executive Director
Margaret McCoy, VCRD Operations and Communications Manager

Vermont's Working Landscape
INVESTING IN OUR FARM
AND FOREST FUTURE

*The Action Plan of the
Vermont Working Landscape Partnership*

September 2011



Produced by
Vermont Council on Rural Development

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



There is a tremendous opportunity for Vermont to build a farm and forest Renaissance as a foundation for the future of the land, culture, and economy of the state.

At the same time, challenges facing farmers and forest products entrepreneurs mean that Vermont could lose the working landscape in a generation.

We are at a tipping point and must make a choice.

The Vermont Council on Rural Development founded the Working Landscape Partnership to address the key ideas, values and priorities heard by Council on the Future of Vermont and set forth in its conclusions.

This Action Plan is designed by the Vermont Working Landscape Council which represents the hundreds of individuals and organizations who have committed to this Partnership. It responds to the thousands of Vermonters who called for action to ensure that the working landscape is preserved as the foundation for Vermont's future. It celebrates the legacy of stewardship of generations of farm and forest families and entrepreneurs whose work has produced the landscape that is central to Vermont's identity. It holds to a central tenet that we will not conserve the working landscape by fiat or purchase, but must invest in the economic foundation of the

land that we love as a people by supporting the enterprises that are its stewards. It outlines steps to make Vermont a national leader and to inspire, attract and nurture a creative new generation of food, farm, and forest entrepreneurs as a foundation for the future prosperity of Vermont communities.

The Action Plan constitutes a concerted Vermont campaign to support local agriculture and forestry, incubate and attract farm and forest entrepreneurs, and conserve Vermont's Working Landscape for the next generation.

It calls for Vermont to unite in fulfillment of five key actions:

- Build a major campaign to celebrate the distinctiveness of the working landscape that is Vermont.
- Target strategic investment through a Vermont Agriculture and Forest Products Development Fund.
- Designate and support "Working Lands".
- Develop tax revenue to support working landscape enterprise development and conservation.
- Create a state planning office and activate the Development Cabinet.

This Action Plan is premised on the fact that the working landscape benefits all Vermonters and all Vermonters must contribute to ensure that it is sustained into the long-term

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future. Doing so will have a positive return on investment in jobs and economic prosperity, but also for the community, environment, wildlife, recreation and so many other aspects of the quality of life of Vermonters.

Vermont can remain central to New England's food system and a trusted source for dairy, grain, vegetable, meat, and fruit markets in state and throughout the region. It can be a lead source of valuable milled wood and innovative value added wood products. Our value-added products will expand the vitality of rural Vermont, assure that working lands remain profitable, and strengthen Vermont's quality of life for generations to come.

Together, we can declare that the working landscape of farms and forests is core to Vermont's sense of place and cultural identity and essential to our economic destination. It is time to raise the flag for Vermont as a national leader and to attract a new generation of entrepreneurs—including our own children—to the land and to the entire value-chain of the natural resource economy.

This Action Plan

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INTRODUCTION



Seen in the context of rural America as a whole, Vermont is a small place with relatively small-scale agriculture and forestry that is challenged in its ability to compete in national or global commodities markets. Like much of the rest of rural America, rural Vermont is fragile: struggling with the loss of youth, aging populations, and in many places the loss of the commerce that built downtowns and vital communities.

Vermont has tremendous assets in the face of these challenges: human capital, rural traditions in agriculture, forestry, recreation and tourism, education, and strong communities supporting local foods and local commerce. But to succeed in confronting its historic challenges, and to retain its most distinctive characteristics, Vermont must redouble its efforts to support strong downtowns and the rural working landscape.

Vermont has focused recent planning efforts to build growth centers, strengthen and expand tax increment financing, and other efforts to encourage strong downtowns statewide.

In the face of the challenges before us, however, Vermont needs a new focus on the regeneration of the rural land-based economy centering on agriculture and forestry to conserve and enhance the Vermont brand, support the prosperity of rural communities, expand in-state renewable energy development, maintain Vermont as a pre-eminent tourism destination, and steward the state's character for the next generation of Vermonters. This is an underappreciated imperative of our time.

In Vermont we have often approached policy concerning the working landscape by considering agriculture and forest-based enterprises separately; it is time to look at working landscape issues all together and to define a unified Working Landscape policy and action plan for Vermont's future.

The economy that built and has maintained Vermont's distinctive pattern of working fields and forests is in a long crisis. The loss of family dairy farms is paralleled by the closing of saw mills and decline of forest-based enterprises. The market economy and public policy have set conditions that spur landowner decisions that result in breaking land up for dispersed single-family and second homes and in commercial sprawl that undermines the look and feel of Vermont. This erodes both environmental health and our downtown economies and thereby the health and prosperity of our communities. The decline of the economic viability of working lands has been gradual but cumulative and threatens to undermine Vermont's distinctiveness, core brand for tourism and business attraction, and many of the key values that unify its citizens.

Vermont faces a fundamental contradiction: while the public desires a strong working landscape for all its scenic, cultural, environmental, and recreational attributes, state and local public policies have not defined the working landscape effectively or built a strategic plan of action and investment commensurate with its importance.

*The economic enterprises that have built and sustain
our working landscape have been essential
to forming the state's character,
communities and culture.*



*Vermont needs a new focus
on regenerating
our rural land-based economy.*

Vermonters value the multiple cultural, recreational, aesthetic, ecological, environmental, and health benefits of the working landscape, but the traditional market economy does not recognize or necessarily contribute to them. It is time for Vermont leadership to take a far-sighted look at the economics behind the Vermont working landscape and unite to build



the public policies needed to encourage the economic vitality that produces and maintains the landscape for the future. Agriculture and forestry are the signature practices that have protected the productive potential and produced the brand elements and identifiable characteristics we attach to the working landscape in Vermont and so are at the heart of this platform.



The Vermont Working Landscape Partnership

The Vermont Working Landscape Partnership unites Vermonters working together to implement key policy and program efforts to advance Vermont’s working landscape. Partnership members are individuals, businesses, and organizations that sign up to further develop and support the action platform in this paper. The Vermont Working Landscape Council serves the Partnership as a strategic center for this effort. Founded

and supported by the Vermont Council on Rural Development (VCRD), the Partnership has built on the work of the VCRD Working Landscape Steering Committee. Gathering input from the Partnership, the Council refined this working platform and serves as the leadership team to promote the platform over the next year.

Conclusions from the Council on the Future of Vermont:

The conservation of the working landscape is a high priority for Vermonters. Vermonters need to recognize that the working landscape depends on a strong farm and forest economy, and that unless this economy prospers, Vermont could lose the working landscape in the next generation. And though the great majority of Vermonters say they want to see the working landscape prosper, public strategy and investment have not lived up to the challenges facing these rural enterprises. In addition, divisions exist within the natural resource economy in the state: organic vs. commodity, small vs. large, value-added vs. production, dairy vs. diversified, buy-local vs. export. Vermonters need to work together with a unified vision and set of economic strategies to ensure that the working landscape is cared for into the future, particularly the farm and forest operations.

Vermont’s natural environment, working landscape and typical pattern of development with villages and open countryside is in danger. Land use planning, which is mostly done at a local level, is often not well coordinated with state and regional development strategy or with long term strategic infrastructure planning. Better coordination of strategic planning at a regional and state level is needed. The disconnection of land use planning from economic development, energy and long term strategic infrastructure planning undermine its utility, and the absence of coordination among levels of planning undermines effectiveness. It is time for Vermont to advance a better-coordinated regional and statewide land-use strategy.

More than any other state in the union, Vermont’s agricultural economy depends on a single product. Today and for the future, the success of family dairy farms is of tremendous value to the state; but there are dangers to the dairy economy, such as price volatility in national and international markets, the high costs of production, the aging of farmers and uncertainty over the next generation of farmers. While Vermonters appreciate the heritage of dairy and its central role in the agricultural economy, the diversification of agricultural enterprises is essential. Along with dairy, diverse and value-added enterprises are a cornerstone of the future of Vermont’s agricultural economy, and a foundation for the economy as a whole. They should be supported and encouraged.

Vermont needs to develop agricultural resources to advance local foods consumption, town by town, region by region. When faced with potential threats from global warming, disease, and the decline of the oil-based economy, many Vermonters support the expansion of local and regional food systems. There is a real opportunity for local food system planning and development to expand local sales, reduce dependence on imports, expand agricultural diversity, and broaden the variety of fresh and value-added markets for local Vermont foods.”

—From *Imagining Vermont; Values and Vision for the Future*, the final report of the Council on the Future of Vermont

The Hopes and Values of Vermonters

In 2008 and 2009 the Council on the Future of Vermont (CFV) conducted what was probably the most comprehensive analysis of public values in Vermont's history. The Council engaged thousands of Vermonters to explore their values and priorities for the future of the state. Polls, interviews, and stakeholder sessions with diverse groups of Vermonters all concurred that revitalizing the state's working landscape was a top priority. Over 97 percent of Vermonters polled endorsed the value of the working landscape as key to our future; this was higher than any other value expressed by the people of Vermont. The Working Landscape Partnership effort is built directly from the expressed values and priorities of Vermont, and this action plan follows from the key ideas voiced by Vermonters in this process.

“When most people talk about the “Working Landscape” they are referring to the land actively used in productive agriculture and

forestry. Yet, to many Vermonters the working landscape also means additional public values it provides, including aesthetics, contributions to the tourism economy, and its central role in building a common sense of place and the Vermont quality of life. These values are all hard to quantify, but vital to the personal identity of Vermonters.”

—From *Imagining Vermont: Values and Vision for the Future*, the final report of the Council on the Future of Vermont.

The Vermont Council on Rural Development has built the Working Landscape effort to bring into action the key ideas heard by the Council on the Future of Vermont and set forth in their conclusions. The platform of action in this report, then, is an implementation plan designed to respond to the thousands of voices in CFV hearings, the poll findings, stakeholder meetings, and contributed writings.

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Working Landscape Partnership Principles

Despite the challenges we face, we need to recognize the dynamism and leadership of forest and farm enterprises today. Vermont has good soils and a receptive climate. There is an increased demand today for locally sourced, sustainably produced farm and forest products. Visitors are strong supporters of the working landscape. Vermonters say it is a crucial foundation to their quality of life. Farmers, foresters, and landowners provide leadership and investment by their hard work and intelligent stewardship. Vermont has extensive non-profit and business support networks. The Working Landscape Council sees tremendous opportunities in agricultural and forest product development, and looks to a new generation of successful farm and forest entrepreneurs to renew the economy and advance this heritage of stewardship of Vermont's working landscape. What conditions will be needed to support their success?

The principles of the Partnership and this platform include the following:

- Advance the alignment between public values and public, private and enterprise behavior around the working landscape;
- Engage Vermonters on the challenges and opportunities ahead concerning: (1) ownership patterns; (2) economic benefits; and (3) "ecological services" as well as cultural and other non-economic benefits;
- Collect data and communicate it to the public to build understanding and investment in the future of the working landscape;
- Advance the economic profitability of the working landscape through the viability of farm and forest enterprises; Create a unity of vision, direction, and goals among economic activity, land and resource conservation, and public regulation.

Vermonters desire a strong working landscape for all its scenic, cultural, economic, environmental, and recreational benefits.



Vermont's Working Landscape Premises

As VCRD's Working Landscape Steering Committee analyzed model working landscape practices from other states and overseas, it came to see that each platform was built on a strong sense of historical values, basic assumptions, political culture, and policy premises.

It is important to state some of the key cultural premises that underlie Vermont working landscape policy, serve as its foundation, and can be used to test the fit of ideas to Vermont's context. Based on the extensive data gathered by the Council on the Future of Vermont, we have identified the following core premises of Vermont's approach to the working landscape.

Working Land Contributions: Vermonters realize that landowners of working lands contribute uncompensated benefits to everyone else—from views, air, water, and ecological services to recreational opportunities and economic brand values.

Local is Better: In Vermont we have historically valued decision making at the most local level possible; this includes land use planning and zoning decisions.

Private Ownership: Private property rights are inalienable and should not be diluted.

Independence: We value the independence of individuals to make stewardship decisions.

Continuity: Most Vermonters disapprove of land speculation, and public policy should provide consistency and predictability to support long-term farm and forest investment.

Public Dedication: Vermont has a long history of building 'carrots and sticks' into land use policy; Vermonters are dedicated to perpetuating the working landscape into the long-term future.

Adaptability: Vermonters recognize that agriculture and forestry are driven by innovation and they change culturally and as economies.

Food Security: Vermont must base agricultural policy partly on producing local, secure, and high-quality food so that we are prepared for any future challenge and so that we and the land are healthy.

Agricultural Ecology: Along with its diversified farm enterprises, the soils, climate, and landscape of Vermont support grass-based ruminant agriculture as a key foundation.

Healthy Forests: Vermonters support native plants and animals and their natural habitats. Forest management built on a strong stewardship ethic maintains the ecological processes that sustain them and us.

Market Conditions: National and international markets set conditions and opportunities for natural resource businesses here, but Vermont farm and forest enterprises cannot compete for the bottom of commodity economies.

Natural Resource Foundation: The working landscape is critical to the success of all other Vermont economies.

Access to the Land: Vermonters have long enjoyed the cultural tradition of public access to hunting, fishing, recreation, and participation in nature on public and private lands. There is a reciprocal relationship between open access to the land and respectful behavior toward the land and landowners.

Environment: Vermonters do not tolerate the degradation of natural assets.

Barriers and Challenges to the Future of the Working Landscape

There is a major contradiction between the values expressed by Vermonters for the future of the working landscape and the difficult realities facing the businesses and families that are the stewards of that landscape. According to the final report of the Council on the Future of Vermont (CFV), Vermonters rank “the working landscape and its heritage” more highly as a common value than any other; but if current trends continue, we will lose the working landscape as we know it in the next 20 years.

The CFV found that, in many ways,

“Vermont’s working landscape defines us, but if existing trends continue it will not exist for our children and children’s children.”

—From *Imagining Vermont: Values and Vision for the Future*, the final report of the Council on the Future of Vermont

Despite the unity Vermonters have for the idea of the working landscape and its priority as a value for the future, we have lacked the ability to unite and implement broadly accepted solutions. Vermonters say the working landscape is important, but we have not lined up together to invest in it.

There is also a cultural contradiction in the disconnection between public attitudes and aspirations regarding the working landscape and public behavior. We make personal and family

choices to develop forest and agricultural land when we build houses in rural areas and shop in sprawl areas rather than in downtowns. We appreciate local farms but spend most of our food dollars for groceries processed and packaged from far away. We sometimes romanticize the forest and hate to see trees cut, but we consume enormous quantities of wood for buildings, paper, and heat. We love the sight of farms but hate the smell or the manure on roads. We love the ideal of the working landscape but do not always understand how people make a living on it and we may object to the practices needed to sustain the economy that feeds and sustains it. We love the landscape, but farmers and foresters who steward it are disrespected or misunderstood, and the value that they provide the public in open land, views, recreation, wildlife habitat, water, air, and other ecological services is not recompensed.

The Global and Regional Nature of Vermont’s Economy

Some of the issues that confront Vermont’s working landscape, from the cost of energy to the price paid for milk, cannot be fully controlled by state action and require concerted regional or national solutions.

The Working Landscape in Vermont today competes with other land uses in an economy that provides relative profitability for its conversion to other uses.

The new global economy has built commodity structures and competition that have dramatically challenged the viability of



Vermont farm and forest enterprises. At the same time, it offers opportunities to build on key natural resource assets and leverage the Vermont Brand. Vermont has not fully capitalized on its advantage of having a market of 65,000,000 people within a day's drive.

The Cost of Doing Business

The cost of doing business in natural resource enterprises is relatively high in Vermont. Enterprises face enormous hurdles in paying costly workman's compensation insurance, health insurance and retirement supports; and long term efforts to stabilize and lower these costs are critically important. The profitability of farm and especially forest enterprises is challenged by capital gains taxes, and the transition of viable enterprises from one generation to another can be deeply compromised by inheritance taxes.

Vermont's natural resource economy is challenged to compete with lower cost production elsewhere, but also with subsidies and supports in other states and countries that make for an uneven playing field.

Rising Land Values

Even though the gap between rich and poor is less than many other states, it is growing and it has an impact on working lands. Real estate market growth outside of Vermont has allowed newcomers to the state to sell houses elsewhere at rates high above what comparable properties cost here; their purchasing power inflates the price of rural Vermont real estate; their ability to build out-of-scale homes in previously working lands has had dramatic effects on both affordability and land use. Many Vermonters can no longer think about land ownership, or of continuing the land-based businesses of their parents' generation.

Rural gentrification, as, for example, the consolidation of land into estates, diminishes the productivity of working lands when once-productive lands are bought up by people who do not rely on income from their productive use. Other lands are sub-divided from larger parcels in production to smaller ones taken out of the natural resource economy. Between 1978 and 2007 the average value of farm acreage went up 454% (from \$640 to \$2,903) while the farm price of milk was relatively flat.

Vermont's Ecological Niche

Historically, Vermont's topography, soils, and climate have contributed to make grass-based agriculture the preponderant opportunity for Vermont farmers. Much of Vermont's farmland is best suited to one or another form of ruminant agriculture and the state has a long history of grass-based farming; but the creative diversification of farms and value-added food development has produced a growing range of farming models in the state—from small vegetable production to cheese, meats, maple syrup, apples, vineyards, and an exciting and growing variety of specialty crops.

Vermont's climate and soils contribute to the growth of premium value hardwoods including sugar maple, yellow birch, beech, ash, and oak, and valuable conifers such as white pine, spruce, fir, and hemlock. Vermont has a long history of forest management and there are exciting new developments in wood manufacturing and non-timber forest products.

Vermont is rich in natural assets that are directly associated with Vermont's working lands: natural communities, surface waters (rivers, streams, lakes, and ponds), wildlife species, habitat corridors and buffers, carbon storage, and the delivery of untold other ecological services.

Key challenges emerge from these ecological assets: supporting grass-based enterprises, creative diversification and value-added development, and protecting these natural resources by finding ways for public value to contribute to their preservation in working lands.

Infrastructure, Marketing and Distribution

Vermont lacks the systems and infrastructure to support the next phase in the advance of forest and farm-based enterprises; the state suffers from gaps in processing, product aggregation, distribution, and market development. Systematically advancing infrastructure could establish and expand market opportunities and efficiencies that can support existing businesses and promote enterprise development.

Intergenerational Transfer

The median age of farm and forest entrepreneurs is in the late 50's. Fiscal realities create enormous hurdles for the next generation to take over enterprises, or, where there are not family members ready to step up, for new entrepreneurs and young people to buy land and enterprises.

Stability and Predictability of Tax Policy

Vermont's Use Value Appraisal taxation (current use) should be seen as a core policy that taxes land at real use-value rather than at a speculative market value as developed for alternative uses. As such, it should be seen as a fair assessment of land value in its current condition rather than a program that subsidizes; it is not a tax cut, but rather a fair tax, one based on real assessment of land value in its current pattern of development. In a state that encourages the active conservation of working land as a core value, land taxation should be based, as much as possible, on the products of the land and their value. The pressure of taxation should not con-

tribute to the degradation of environmental values or fertility by putting pressure on land management that encourages unsustainable practices. Current Use as a policy represents a paramount community value of supporting the long-term stability of working lands in Vermont. Its stability is essential to the predictability for return on investment in agriculture and forestry. It supports a long-term vision for the future of Vermont that includes farm and forest land, and contributes to a dynamic diversity of land-based and value-added natural resource development. It can be argued that farm and forest lands and conserved lands outside current use are paying taxes beyond the current use value of the land, and so are actually subsidizing developed lands in the state. Current Use taxation is essential to the continuity of Vermont's Working Landscape. Consistency and predictability of current use taxation is critically important in the decision making of enterprise leaders of farm and forest operations.

Education

Young Vermonters and newcomers to the state may not understand the economic and cultural role of Vermont's working landscape enterprises and all the values that they contribute to the general public. Young people with natural resource economy vocations don't always have the resources or opportunities, from courses to apprenticeships, to learn the skills to succeed on the land. Schools throughout Vermont are expanding food education, farm visits and local foods in school. Vocational Technology programs at the high school and state college level are essential and should be strengthened. Vermont's Land Grant University, the University of Vermont, has established "food systems" as a core "Spire of Excellence." There is some progress, but much to be done to invest in and lead these efforts forward—especially on the forest side.

Climate Change

Scientists describe both internal and external effects of climate change on Vermont's working landscape. Many fear, for example, that the sugar maple's geographic range will move north, undermining the strength of Vermont maple sugar industry. Invasive plant and insect pests following warmer weather can weaken forest health and damage farm crops, thereby undermining the viability of enterprises.

On the other hand, changes outside the state could dramatically affect the fortunes of working landscape enterprises here. Some predict a significant drying out of the West and Mid West; diminished aquifers may not sustain agricultural

enterprises in their current form in these areas. Vermont is predicted to remain a wetter state, and agricultural lands here may become increasingly important in providing regional food security.

Vermont's farms and forests can play a meaningful role in climate change abatement. Unfragmented forests, especially those managed for long rotations, are an important carbon sink, as is farmland planted in perennial crops. These lands can also supply the growing, local biomass fuel sector in the state. Farms and forests can also host renewable energy generation facilities, helping replace hydrocarbon energy sources.

Trends for the Future of Vermont's Working Landscape



Vermont's identity has always been closely linked with its iconic images of dairy cows, cropland in active production, extensive and verdant forests, and farms and fields with beautiful mountain backdrops. The economic enterprises that have built and sustain this working landscape – dairies, sugaring operations, orchards, family forests, wood mills and secondary manufacturers – have been essential to forming the state's

character, communities and culture.

Now, however, mounting evidence, alarming trends, and a lack of a comprehensive policy are threatening the demise of the economic viability of the state's working landscape. Left unaddressed, these trends will dramatically change the way Vermonters connect to the land.

Dairy Industry is in Crisis

Dairy continues to dominate Vermont's agricultural land use and production, but multiple indicators show many dairy farms are in significant danger of failure.

- From 1947 to 2010, the number of dairy farms in Vermont has plummeted from 11,206 to 1,007; we've lost dairy farms in each of the last 19 years.
- Milk and dairy products continue to dominate Vermont agricultural cash receipts, accounting for 77% of total 2007 farm income, and much more when you add in hay, beef and sugaring connected to dairy farms.
- In 2008, milk sold in stores at an average of \$3.12 per gallon, but the price paid to Vermont dairy farmers was only \$.99 cents – \$.66 less than the cost of production.

A Challenged Forest Products Industry

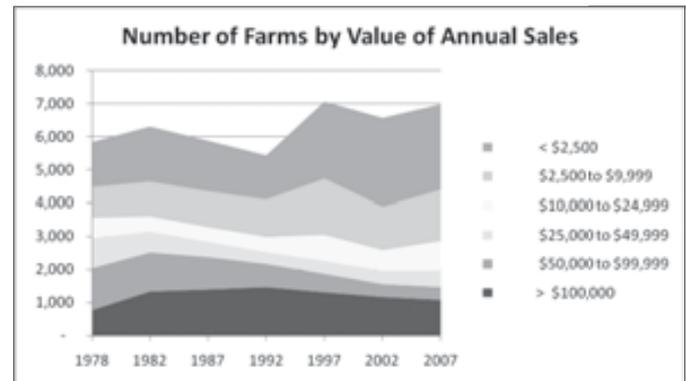
The Vermont forest products industry is in slow and unheralded decline which has resulted in dramatic reductions in wood processing and manufacturing.

- Nearly 80% of Vermont's 6 million acres of land are forested and more than 80% of these lands are privately owned.
- In 2000, Vermont forest products businesses processed 927,811 cords of wood; in 2008 they processed 584,150, a 37% drop in 8 years.
- The number of mills in Vermont has declined 43% from 185 in 2002 down to 105 in 2008.
- Mill production also dropped in half over the past decade, going from a high of 260,855 thousand board feet (Mbf) in 1999 to just 133,814 Mbf in 2008.

Use and Ownership

There has been a significant decline in the use of land in Vermont for agricultural and forestry purposes and changes in the way the land is owned and managed.

- Fifty years ago, half of the state's land was in farms. That number has dropped by almost 60% – today, only 1/5 of Vermont's land is being farmed.¹
- Forest fragmentation and increased parcelization have meant that the number of parcels has gone up, while their size has gone down, diminishing their economic viability and the ecological services they provide.
- While Vermont has significantly more farms than twenty years ago (a good sign of entrepreneurial energy), less than 1/4 of them have annual sales greater than \$50,000 and 2/5 have sales less than \$2,500.²



While the number of farms in Vermont is increasing, almost 60% of them reported annual sales under \$10,000 in 2007.

- From 1980 until 2008, the number of VT housing units grew by 39%. Developed land grew 42% over a slightly shorter period (1982-2003). This increase in development was twice as fast as the state's 21% population growth.³
- From 1990 to 2007 the average value of land acreage in Vermont rose 351%– higher than the national average of 299%.



From 1947 to 2010, the number of dairy farms in Vermont plummeted from 11,000 to 1,000

The Implications

The incremental results of these trends are devastating. Just imagine a Vermont...

- Where few make their living from work in the woods or fields, where the characteristic Vermont look of mixed open fields and forest is lost forever, and where Vermont looks, functions and feels more like southern New Hampshire, Massachusetts and Connecticut;
- Where the only places to connect to nature are overcrowded

parks or private preserves with limited public access or meaningful economic contributions to rural communities;

- Where water and air quality are impaired;
- Where the culture and heritage associated with hard physical labor, community interdependence and neighborliness, shared governance and lending a hand gets replaced by self-centered individualism;
- Where Vermont looks like Anywhere, USA.



High Potential Opportunities

In the midst of these dispiriting trends, there are tremendous assets and opportunities for Vermont’s working landscape and our agricultural and forest economies.

- Per capita, Vermont has more local and organic farms, CSAs and farmers markets than any other state in the country.
- Recent reports indicate that Vermont could produce about 20% of its energy needs from farm and forest resources.⁴
- A creative new generation of networked farm and forest entrepreneurs are growing Vermont-based companies that provide biofuels, artisan and cave-aged cheese, specialty wood products, and organic seeds, produce, grains and other value-added products.

For Vermonters to save our working landscape, we will need to come together and commit to investing in the enterprises that sustain it and provide food, fiber, energy and sustenance for

the 21st century. We will need to develop and then implement comprehensive public policies as well as private innovation and investment that ensure Vermont’s working landscape will not just survive but truly thrive for multiple generations.

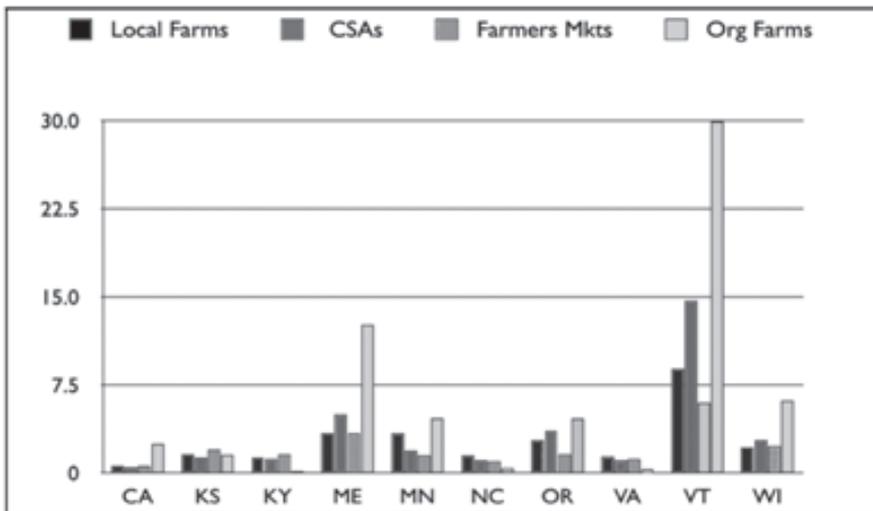
Citations:

¹USDA National Agricultural Statistics Service (NASS) Census of Agriculture – 2007 Census of Agriculture Report. <http://www.agcensus.usda.gov/index.asp>.

²USDA National Agricultural Statistics Service (NASS) Census of Agriculture – 2007 Census of Agriculture Report. <http://www.agcensus.usda.gov/index.asp>. Chart created by Nancy Wasserman of Sleeping Lion Associates, Inc.

³Housing and population date - US Census for 1980 and 2006-2008 American Community Survey 3-Year Estimate Land development data from Disappearing Vermont: A report of fifty indicators that show what is happening to Vermont’s environment and way of life. Published by Vermonters for a Sustainable Population — March 2008, available at <http://www.vspop.org/DisappearingVermontFINAL08.pdf>

⁴Delhagen. Edward, Farm Energy Innovation in Vermont: A Report to the Sustainable Agriculture Council, December 2008. P. 10 available at http://www.uvm.edu/sustainableagriculture/Documents/energy_innovation.pdf



Vermont is a national leader in reaching local markets, which results in fresher, better tasting and healthier foods; higher profit margins and greater retained wealth within the community. Among other things, this chart shows Vermont stands about 30 times above the national average in organic farms per capita and leads in all categories.

—A. Rosenfeld, Stuart (2010) ‘Sustainable Food Systems Cluster, Vermont Style’, European Planning Studies.

Goals for a Vermont Working Landscape Policy



Vermonters want to have a viable farm and forest economy and they want to see a working landscape, with all its public benefits and ecological services, as central to the land and economy of Vermont one hundred years from today. To steward the Vermont Working Landscape in our time, the people of Vermont must confront challenges to its economic foundations, and build a new social compact around the future of the land we love and depend on. This compact must include a key set of goals aimed to:

Make a Vital Farm and Forest Economy a Foundation for the Future of Vermont

- Keep Vermonters on the land. Increase the number and viability of farm and forest enterprises. Support the success of existing enterprises and engage young and new farmers and forest entrepreneurs and help them build viable land-based enterprises that provide a good living and keep land in active production.
- Increase access to local and affordable foods, and increase food security.
- Develop industry clusters to add the highest possible value to each natural resource product in the state, tap into regional, national and international markets, and thereby capture that value as a foundation for community prosperity. Increase value-added processing and production toward this end.
- Increase the acreage in crops and pasturage, the number of people directly employed in farm and forest-based enterprises and increase job creation in sustainable natural resource economic development.

Re-Charge the Vermont Brand to Attract a New Generation to the Land

- Retain the mixture of farm fields, forests and waters, and village and urban centers to optimize the power of the Vermont brand as a core strategy to attract tourists and new businesses, expand market opportunities, provide recreational access and opportunity, and contribute to the quality of life of all who choose to live in the Green Mountain State. Vermont should hold to a core policy that links the Vermont brand back to the agricultural and forestry products that come from the working landscape.

Sustain Ecological Services and Public Benefits of Working Lands

- Increase the environmental sustainability of Vermont by increasing energy generation and fuel development and thereby lower Vermont's carbon footprint, reduce greenhouse gases and phosphorus run off, clean lakes and rivers, and provide additional environmental benefits.

No one knows the future, but working landscape policy in Vermont must promote food, fiber, energy and economic security while protecting and managing natural assets so that they can reliably support the future health, prosperity, and quality of life of Vermont's future generations.



ACTION ELEMENTS

A concerted Vermont campaign to support local agriculture and forestry, attract and incubate farm and forest entrepreneurs, and conserve Vermont's Working Landscape for the next generations



Vermonters have engaged in generations of debate about working landscape policy and investment to spur agricultural diversification and value added development, to support a strong forest economy, and to conserve our working landscape for the long-term future.

Today, Vermont is at a turning point and must face a fundamental contradiction: while Vermonters desire a strong working landscape for all its scenic, cultural, economic, environmental, and recreational attributes, we have not built action and investment commensurate with its importance or the crisis it faces.

Vermont must maintain and strengthen existing supports for the working landscape, including Use Value Appraisal (“current use”) tax policy and the state’s conservation investments. If we expect landholders to make long-term commitments

to agriculture and forestry, it is crucial that the state make a long-term commitment to consistent and predictable use value taxation on working land.

But these investments are not enough. It is time for Vermonters to unite to invest in the economic vitality that produces and maintains the landscape for the future. Doing so will build jobs, support new enterprises, and conserve the land in line with the vision, values and priorities of Vermonters.

Vermont should make the working landscape a defining principle for Vermont state policy. This policy should act as a driver for investments in promotion, economic development, higher education, tourism, tax policy, and planning, and celebrate and advance the many ways in which working farms and forests are at the center of Vermont’s history, culture and arts, economy, community, and way of life.



A.

**BUILD A MAJOR CAMPAIGN
TO CELEBRATE THE DISTINCTIVENESS
OF THE WORKING LANDSCAPE THAT IS VERMONT**

We need to celebrate and re-commit to the fact that Vermont's working landscape is central to our economy, quality of life, and core values as a people. We need to rededicate ourselves to ensure that the working landscape is perpetuated for future generations. We need to ensure that Vermont remains the milk-bowl and breadbasket of New England, the source of high-value forest products, a green economy leader and a model for the nation in entrepreneurial best practices on the land.

We have an historic opportunity to lay claim to leadership in food products and forestry for an expanded brand identity.

It is time to systematically raise the flag that that Vermont is the national leader in working land-based enterprise development; that Vermont is the leader of America's local food systems and forest products development, and the place for young entrepreneurs, both local and from outside of Vermont, to grow businesses. Then we must guide policy and investment to make it so. Vermont must capture the imagination of young people within our state and nationally to build a renewed agriculture and forest products economy for the 21st Century.



B.

**TARGET STRATEGIC INVESTMENT
THROUGH A VERMONT AGRICULTURE
AND FOREST PRODUCTS DEVELOPMENT FUND**

The Vermont Agriculture and Forest Products Development Fund (VAFPDF –“the Fund”) should be developed to unite and coordinate working lands development efforts of the Agencies of Agriculture, Commerce, and Natural Resources and collaborate with the statutory authorities with state resources to systematically advance entrepreneurship, business development, job creation, and working land use regulation.

Led by the **Vermont Agriculture and Forest Products Development Board (VAFPDB –“the Board”)**, the Fund will be the engine that contributes to economic development at the same time it protects and sustains ecological services, recreation, scenic and other public values of the land. Coordinating working lands enterprise development efforts will bring a stronger capacity to both farm and forest development and the entire

value chains in these industries, particularly by driving more effective support to value-added development and wrapping together public and private resources. Working lands enterprises form a continuum from local food systems entities to dairy and diversified agriculture products, forest-based maple syrup production, timber and value-added wood manufacturing. Working lands enterprises on both sides of the continuum can have critically important contributions to energy development. Key ecological management issues of working landscape enterprises, ranging from water quality management to responding to invasive insects, can also be significantly improved with a coordinated focus.

To further advance coordination among agencies and partners, Vermont must eliminate the overlap and duplication between existing statutory development committees, particularly on the agriculture side and including but not limited to the Vermont Agriculture Development Board, the Sustainable Agriculture Council, the Agriculture Innovation Center Board and the Farm Viability Board.

The Fund should be created and staffed at the Vermont Agency of Agriculture Food and Markets with the purpose of supporting the entrepreneurial development of new land-based and value-added businesses, the expansion of potential high growth enterprises, and the provision of infrastructure that will spur business success and rural prosperity.

Governed by a partnership that includes the Vermont Department of Forests Parks and Recreation and the Agency of Commerce and leveraging technical assistance and resources from other state agencies and state-funded authorities and non-profits, the Fund will serve as the center-point for Working Landscape enterprise development in Vermont.

To be successful, the Fund must be provided with substantial and sustained capital from the state of Vermont and leverage significant additional funding from a variety of sources, including federal funds, the private sector, philanthropy, and patient capital investment.

Working lands businesses need different types of technical assistance and capital depending on where they are in their business life cycle. The Fund will provide a “clearinghouse” of support for enterprise innovation and growth in the food, forest products, renewable energy, and sustainable farm and forest transition sectors, while creating, recognizing, and supporting investment opportunities in those sectors. A public/private partnership, the Fund will exist to support the public good that vibrant farm and forest enterprises help create through active involvement in Vermont’s working landscape.

Through the Fund, Vermont can dramatically expand the number and success of working lands enterprises as foundations for the future with significant investment in capitalization and technical assistance in **three key focus areas:**

- 1. Emerging Enterprise Services** for start-up, expanding, and changing farm, forest and value-added businesses will include:
 - A menu of grants and loans and financial packaging of existing funding sources.
 - Technical and regulatory assistance.
- 2. Growth Enterprise Services** for a small number of high growth enterprises each year will include:
 - Financial packaging of state, federal, philanthropic, equity, and market capital for high growth enterprises (or networked clusters of enterprises).
 - Ombudsman to help land-based enterprises through development processes with regulatory assistance, site location



assistance, and other systematic development support.

3. Infrastructure Investment through grants and loans for strategic infrastructure that supports:

- Production, marketing, and distribution systems.
- Lead in strategic investment in support of infrastructure development.
- Research and product development, patenting, and production, to spur innovative farm, forest, and value-added enterprises.

Criteria for Investment

The Fund will invest in applications that support productive farm and forest lands in the context of the overall goals enumerated throughout this action plan to:

- Directly advance private sector business development and job creation;
- Support the economy that sustains working lands;
- Contribute to or sustain ecological services including but not limited to clean water, clean air, carbon sequestration and wildlife habitat;

- Directly support private sector entrepreneurship and investment and capture new market opportunities;
- Advance strategic development opportunities as determined by its investment board and informed by the best economic cluster and system analysis available (including Farm to Plate and other sector analyses).

Additional Features of the VAFPDF

1. Working Lands Investment Tax Credit

The Board should oversee a **Working Lands Investment Tax Credit** which would accrue to lenders or investors that make enterprise investments that perpetuate or expand production, diversification or value-added development, or which help farm and forest enterprises secure or expand their land base. Investors would apply to the Board for an allocation from tax credit resources dedicated by the Legislature as part of the process when an investor proposed an enterprise loan – that allocation being subject to a set of priorities, criteria and as-



surances similar to those that might otherwise apply to other grants or loans issued by the Board.

2. VAFPFD Conservation Investment

The Board has the authority to invest in the perpetual conservation of working land connected to land-based enterprises when that investment can wrap in with the other enterprise services in a timely manner to promote job creation and the development or expansion of that enterprise.

VAFPFD Leadership and Governance

The Fund and all its investments will be led by the Board which unifies existing leadership in natural resources development and includes:

- Secretary of Agriculture
- Secretary of Commerce
- Commissioner of Forests, Parks, and Recreation
- Director of the Sustainable Jobs Fund



- Director of the Vermont Economic Development Authority
- Director of the Vermont Housing Conservation Board
- Four individuals appointed by the Governor to represent dairy agriculture, non-dairy agriculture, forestry, and value-added business leadership.

The Board will select a private sector member as its Chair.

The Board will determine the specific allocation of funds for the implementation of its mission and systematically wrap together the programmatic offerings from the organizations represented in service to working lands enterprises.

This Board will have sole power to oversee investments, grants and the provision for technical assistance, and will have the ability to commission a fiscal agent to manage funds and other services it deems appropriate to the fulfillment of its mission.

C.
DESIGNATE AND SUPPORT
“WORKING LANDS”

The single most important part of the infrastructure that Vermont has and will have to offer entrepreneurs in the future is working land that will continue to be available to provide food and fiber. By designating “Working Lands” Vermont will be supporting the economic viability of these lands for long-term stewardship, enabling generational and ownership transitions, encouraging start-up operations, supporting farm and forest enterprises whose products require patient management, and systemically deepening the state’s support for long-term conservation of particularly important working land assets.

“Working Lands” will be officially and voluntarily designated as available and affordable for agriculture and forestry use for the long term, and receive priority for the use of easement purchase, financial incentives and supports, and regulatory assistance for their working enterprises. “Working Lands” would be those that host and are owned by or are under long-term lease to bona fide farm or forest operations. They should consist of soils and other physical characteristics that make the property reasonably suited for long-term, economically-viable farm and forest production.

“Working Lands” would be designated through farm and forest landowners voluntarily electing to secure designation, provided the land first meets clear and established criteria around productivity, management, durability, strategic location, and compatibility to local and regional plans.

There would be no overarching penalties if and when designated Working Lands were developed. Designated lands will

be able to access a range of tools and benefits listed below; any penalties on development would be those entailed in the provision of these particular benefits.

“Two Track” Designation Process

Designation applications would be made to the newly organized Vermont Agriculture and Forest Products Development Board which would evaluate them and coordinate benefits that accrue to designated lands and enterprises.

While Working Lands designation would actively support businesses that manage working lands, it would designate land and not enterprises. Full “Working Lands” status and associated “benefits” should be reserved for lands on which there is an active enterprise – a farm business or forest management with wood products as a primary objective. Similarly, in deploying the resources of the Fund, highest priority for enterprise investments (loans, technical assistance, grants, etc.) should be given to enterprises with a direct land link—for example investments in agricultural processing on an operating farm—or where those enterprises, though not on a farm or forest tract, directly add value to farm and forest products and so provide economic foundation for those operations.

Designation could happen in one of two ways:

(a) Community Designation: A municipality’s governing body (e.g. select board) could elect to designate “Working Lands Districts” by using the designation criteria (see below) to identify areas in the community where the governing body determines farming and forestry should be the “highest and

best use.” The town would employ a formal Chapter 117 plan/zoning process. Upon designation, municipal benefits could be directed to the “Working Lands District” such as municipal tax abatement, municipal conservation funds and other locally defined benefits. Once designated by the community, and approved by the VAFPDB, any working farm or working forestland owner within a “district” could “elect in” and be eligible for “benefits” without any formal, separate parcel-specific designation process.

(b) Parcel Designation: In towns that do not choose to so designate lands, individual or groups of landowners could apply to the VAFPDB for parcel designation and could thereby avail all benefits, except those designated at the municipal level. In this case a full designation application process would be managed by the VAFPDB, employing the designation criteria, below. A parcel designated in a community without a Working Lands District would not receive local benefits but could avail all other benefits listed below.

Designation Criteria

- **Productivity:** Current site productivity, physical attributes and condition of the land, including soils, parcel location, operability (access, configuration of parcel, drainage patterns, access to water, etc.), infrastructure, proximity to transportation and/or markets.
- **Management:** Management history and current land and business management plan.
- **Durability:** Indicators that the land will remain in production in the future, including future management and enterprise plans, the circumstances in the surrounding landscape, and legal commitments such as long-term management agreements, conservation easements, agricultural and forestry leases, and commitments to resell as farm or forest land.
- **Land Use Compatibility:** Is Working Lands designation

compatible with prevailing planning and zoning, especially regional “growth center” designation(s), and existing or planned public investments?

Benefits of Working Lands Designation

Enrolled Working Lands would be eligible for a menu of policies and programs that includes the following categorical supports:

- **Priority for Funding:** Lands enrolled as Working Lands and the enterprises supporting those lands would receive priority for programs administered by the VAFPDB, as well as for other programs, administered by other agencies, aimed at strengthening the agriculture and forestry sectors. These would include technical assistance programs such as the Vermont Housing and Conservation Board’s Farm Viability Enhancement Program, the Vermont Sustainable Job Fund’s Agriculture Development Program, stewardship incentive programs for forest land, and state marketing assistance. It would include financial assistance such as USDA infrastructure funding, cost sharing for infrastructure improvements, and Vermont Economic Development Authority loans. Working Farm Land would also receive priority for easement programs directed at supporting agriculture, including VHCB’s Farmland Protection Program. Working Forest Land would receive priority for a new VHCB Working Forest program that parallels the VHCB Farmland program, including similar mechanisms to maintain affordability.

Designated Working Lands could also be priority areas for pilot programs of simplified regulation between the Agency of Agriculture and Agency of Natural Resources and other pilot or demonstration projects in general—including potential stewardship, innovative technology or processing projects of strategic importance to the future of the natural resource sector.



- **Regulatory Assistance:** The Agriculture and Forest Products Development Fund would provide regulatory and permit assistance to enterprises tied to these lands.
- **Technical and Business Planning Assistance:** The Agriculture and Forest Products Development Fund will provide direct assistance and serve as a clearing house to assist Working Lands enterprises in connecting to educational and technical assistance and business planning through VHCB Farm Viability, FPR, VSJE, SBDC, UVM, NOFA and other supporting services.
- **State Estate Tax Relief:** Designated Working Lands would avoid state inheritance or estate taxes based on development value. In calculating the value of an estate, working lands should be accounted at use value appraisal. This Vermont estate tax relief would be available provided (1) Those lands have been in active farm or forestry use for at least five years prior to death; and (2) Those lands are bequeathed or sold to a person or entity that continues to use the lands for active farm or forestry purposes for a continuous period of 10 years after the date of transfer.
- **Capital Gains Tax Relief:** Agricultural and forest Working Lands and the products from designated Working Lands should receive preferential treatment under state capital gains taxation by increasing the exclusion rate from 40% to 80% on the products and materials of production connected to these lands, and by extending this capital gains exclusion to include

the sale of used equipment for primary farm and forest production on the land.

- **Working Forest Conservation Easements:** The State of Vermont should add working forest protection to the statutory charge of the Vermont Housing Conservation Board and invest in a Working Forest easement program to be located there.
- **Town-Based Benefits:** In addition to all the state benefits listed here, towns can choose to take a leadership role in encouraging the designation of “Working Lands Districts,” potentially planning more effectively for agricultural and forest lands, providing regulatory relief or tax benefits for enterprise development in these districts or even bonding to support conservation of key strategic properties. New barns and buildings, or renovated heritage structures, kilns or processing facilities, and appropriately scaled, value-added facilities entailed as part of Working Lands enterprises could receive 10-year tax abatement.
- **Eliminate Sales Tax from the Primary Products of Working Lands:** Sales tax would be eliminated, not just on “Working Lands” per se, but for the products of primary processors of agricultural or forest businesses—from flowers and bedding plants to compost, hay, logs, boards or sawdust. Products of the working landscape should not be subject to the sales tax at their point of production.

D.
DEVELOP TAX REVENUE
TO SUPPORT WORKING LANDSCAPE
ENTERPRISE DEVELOPMENT AND CONSERVATION

The working landscape contributes to everyone and everyone should contribute to the working landscape.

Without significant investment we risk losing the working landscape and all that it means culturally, ecologically and economically to Vermonters in this generation. **We must make a choice.**

Because significant investment is essential to sustain Vermont's working landscape, Vermont should assess an incremental addition to the Vermont sales tax to invest in Vermont working

lands and the enterprises that sustain them. The State should raise at least \$15 million annually to support the Agriculture and Forest Products Development Fund. Funds would be invested in infrastructure, enterprise development, and designated "Working Lands" conservation and incentives.

One way to develop state revenue would be the implementation of key elements of the VT Blue Ribbon Tax Commission to expand the sales tax to some services. With this broader sales tax base, the tax rate could be reduced, but still provide resources for Working Lands.



E.
**CREATE A STATE PLANNING
OFFICE AND ACTIVATE
THE DEVELOPMENT CABINET**

Government has a crucial leadership role to play in planning for the future of Vermont's working landscape.

State leadership on land use planning, environmental regulation, and enterprise development needs to come together in a state planning center reporting to the Development Cabinet in the Governor's Office. The responsibilities of this planning office should include:

- Conducting a full analysis of public policy barriers and regulatory duplications between federal, state and local agencies to facilitate working landscape enterprise development and working lands conservation while protecting environmental health and public safety. It is especially important to reconcile the complex and sometimes competing priorities for environmental protection, public health and safety, landscape preservation and working landscape enterprise development.
- Improving coordination and cooperation between state agencies responsible for economic development planning, land use planning, and environmental protection.

- Strengthening the dialogue and coordination between town and regional leadership and state agency planning to better implement their goals, policies and programs in a context that pro-actively supports working landscape development and protection. This does not mean top-down planning; it means more systematic communication to strengthen planning for land and natural resources that unites leadership at all levels. It also means advancing consistency and predictability in the regulatory process.

The Governor's Development Cabinet should be re-activated to function as a central policy and program coordinating venue in the Executive Office, specifically to oversee the development and implementation of economic development planning and land-use planning for the future of Vermont. The Development Cabinet needs to play a key role in ensuring effective application of state resources dedicated to the support of working landscape enterprise development and land conservation.



VCRD Working Landscape Steering Committee

VCRD initially convened a small leadership team to frame the issues and ideas presented in this platform. Members of this steering committee included:

Bob Ackland, *Consultant*
Roger Allbee, *then VT Secretary of Agriculture, Food, and Markets*
Gil Livingston, *President, Vermont Land Trust*
Jonathan Wood, *then VT Secretary of Agency of Natural Resources*
Greg Brown, *Select Board Member, Dummerston*
Deb Brighton, *Independent Economist and Consultant*
Paul Costello, *VCRD Executive Director*
Margaret McCoy, *VCRD Operations and Communications Manager*

The Role of the Vermont Council on Rural Development

The Vermont Council on Rural Development is charged by the federal Farm Bill to serve as a neutral convener and facilitator of public processes at both the community and state level to advance rural community development. VCRD has founded, managed, staffed, and facilitated the process of deliberation of the Vermont Working Landscape Steering Committee and the Vermont Working Landscape Council. All final content and policy decisions have been made by the Vermont Working Landscape Council working on behalf of the full Vermont Working Landscape Partnership.

Sponsors of the Working Landscape Partnership

Cabot Creamery Cooperative
Anonymous
The High Meadows Fund, a supporting organization of the Vermont Community Foundation
The Lintilhac Foundation
The John Merck Fund
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Vermont Agriculture Innovation Center
Vermont Community Foundation
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