

'This is a bold initiative' Roger Allbee, former ag. sec'y

State eyes ag., forestry outlays

Initial investment fund of \$3M could hit \$15M

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ST. ALBANS — Two Franklin County legislators from opposite sides of the political aisle have joined forces in a bid to improve the development of agricultural and forestry products and businesses in Vermont.

Funding for infrastructure development, support for businesses, and conservation of Vermont's forests are all part of a working landscapes bill introduced in the legislature last week.

The bill proposes initial funding of \$3 million, with plans to increase funding to \$15 million annually in the future.

Democratic State Sen. Sara Kittell and Republican Rep. Carolyn Branagan, of Georgia, are initial sponsors of the bill and appeared at a press conference in Montpelier this week to tout its benefits.

"This is a bold initiative," said former Secretary of Agriculture, Roger Allbee, chair of the Vermont Working Landscape Partnership, which developed the bill. The bill was more than two years in the making, said Allbee.

The primary mechanism for developing infrastructure, potentially including such items as slaughterhouses and saw mills, would be an enterprise fund accepting state and private funds.

The fund would be overseen by a board made up of the heads of multiple state agencies connected to agriculture, economic development, forestry, sustainable jobs and conservation. The Vermont Development Board and the Sustainable Agriculture Council would be expanded and have forestry and the promotion of forest products added to their responsibilities. Each of those groups would have three seats on the enterprise board, whose chair would be appointed by the governor.

The board is charged with providing investment in and technical assistance to agricultural and forestry businesses.

That's in keeping with what is needed locally, said Franklin County Industrial Development Corporation (FCIDC) director Tim Smith. For the past year FCIDC has been part of a coalition of Franklin County economic development groups working with farmers to determine the needs of farmers and businesses engaged in diversified agriculture.

Slaughterhouses are one need. Currently, organic farmers wishing to sell their meat across Vermont's borders must have their animals slaughtered in Randolph. Demand is so high, farmers are scheduling the slaughtering of animals a year in advance, said Smith.

Many producers need assistance with marketing, financial and business planning, according to Smith. "There's an education curve for a lot of producers," said Smith.

Producers' needs may change as their businesses grow and develop. A farmer who was easily able to identify and reach local markets may need help planning for expansion into markets outside Vermont, or assistance with financial planning for capital investments, for example.

The enterprise board would not supplant local efforts to provide technical and business assistance for agriculture and forestry, according to Allbee, but it would provide support for those efforts.

The board would provide services to "growth business," according to Paul Costello, director of the Vermont Council on Rural Development. "We also want to grow the next Ben & Jerry's," said Costello.

The bill also creates a new designation for municipal plans – the working lands designation. Towns would designate areas composed of farmland, forestland, and/or businesses supporting those lands as a "working lands enterprise area." The hope is to have business and technical services, possibly tax benefits or increased grant eligibility for businesses and farms within those areas, explained Allbee. The exact benefits of being in the working lands enterprise area are still being determined, according to Allbee.

Individual parcels also would be eligible for a working lands designation offering similar potential benefits.

The state has lacked a mechanism for connecting state investment plans to local needs, said Allbee. The bill creates an office of planning coordination within the Agency of Administration. The office will be charged with coordinating planning and investment within state government and between the state, regional and local levels.

The bill also charges the Vermont Housing and Conservation Board, which works with the Vermont Land Trust, with preserving working forests being used for logging or maple sugaring.

Forestry is an important part of the effort to preserve the state's working landscape, said Allbee. "Our lumber industry has the same needs as our agricultural industry," he added.

Both industries need to create value added products, according to Allbee. "We can't survive as a commodity producer," said Allbee.

One of the challenges for value added forestry products is global competition, according to local forester Gabe Parent. Consumers want to pay less, and that often means buying products such as furniture from China, said Parent.

There are only two sawmills in the state currently milling hard woods, according to Parent, who said the industry has been hurt by the decline in housing construction. Currently, the area's hard woods are mostly going to Canada.

Much of what loggers are cutting is low quality woods to be chipped and burned, said Parent.

"The other part of this bill is to celebrate what we have," said Allbee. "We ought to celebrate who we are and what we are."

The bill includes the development of a marketing campaign focusing on Vermont's working landscape economy, attracting new farm and forestry businesses, and reinforcing Vermont's image as a source of quality food and forest products.

Costello describes the campaign as putting "out a call to entrepreneurs across the country that this is where it's going to be happening."

"Our working landscape has always defined us," said Allbee.

The purpose of the bill is to continue to develop an economy that conserves the land, according to Costello.

A large corporation is not going to come in and transform Vermont's economy in Costello's view. "We need to invent it ourselves," said Costello.