

INTERVIEW

Paul Costello

Mr. Costello is executive director of the Vermont Council on Rural Development and coordinator of the Vermont Working Lands Coalition. We interviewed him about last year's "Working Lands" law, which resulted, among other things, in state grants to small agricultural and forestry-based businesses – everything from a solar drying facility for cranberries to a water-flow system to optimize trout and strawberry aquaponic production.

What trends led your organization and others to push for Working Lands legislation?

Well, the loss of dairy farms obviously, the loss of land in production. Also, the fact that there is a groundswell of excitement about agricultural development opportunities, that a food-systems renaissance is taking hold all over the state. The forest-products industry has also got all kinds of creativity going on. The bottom line is that agriculture and forest-product development are the foundations of the core essence of Vermont – the beauty of the land, the mix of farm fields and woodlands that surround us – that are essential to our quality of life and recreation. And none of that is an accident. The Vermont that we have is a result of the economic decisions of landowners over generations.

How did the push to support Working Lands arise, and what success have you had to date?

The Vermont Council on Rural Development is a nonprofit convener of rural policy. We've been bringing people together around these issues for over 10 years. The Council on the Future of Vermont, which we managed, was the largest-scale analysis of public values outside of politics in the history of Vermont. It found that the working landscape was a core public priority, supported by 97% of Vermonters. We pulled together a working landscape council to look at this as a 20-year issue for the future of Vermont. We framed a platform and established the Working Landscape Partnership, made up of many individuals and organizations, to move it forward. It was the foundation of Act 142, which was enacted in 2012 and created the Working Landscape Enterprise Board and Fund.

The Legislature put \$1 million into the fund for grants for the working lands economy.

That's right. The first grants are going out right now, and we've been working with a number of key legislators to increase that funding over time. This was the first new program in Vermont since

the 2008 recession, in very challenging budgetary circumstances. Our success has been really a measure of the devotion of the people of Vermont to the future of the farm and forest economy as a foundation for the conservation of the land that we love.

There was a lot of interest in the grants. I believe there was \$11.5 million worth of applications for the \$1 million that is being handed out.

It shows that this is a really dynamic area of the economy. Agriculture is cool to young people today. Vermont is a national leader in community-based agricultural enterprises. The forest-products industry has got a tremendous amount of creativity and young entrepreneurs. So the wave of applications shows a real eagerness to move forward, a real entrepreneurial spirit. We are at a tipping point in terms of an economy that is moving from commodities to myriad creativity in value-added products and processing. You see it in beer producers, in the cheeses made here, in the variety of forest products, from bowls to toys to furniture. Capturing the high end of value from our commodities is a foundation for our future rural prosperity.

This year your group asked the Legislature for \$5 million in grant funding for each of the next three years, the "5 x 3" plan. They ended up budgeting \$1.425 million for next year. How does that make your coalition feel?

We think that there has been a very positive dialogue and sincere dedication by the Governor and the legislators to do what is possible. With this year's budget realities, any increase is a victory. In fact, just maintaining this as the first new program in four years is a victory. The fact that a wide range of state agencies and boards are now all together at the table driving business development on the land is a huge victory. The fact that Vermonters are officially dedicated to the future of the working landscape today is a huge step forward. The coalition and partnership that are working on this are committed to advancing this into the future. Five million by three isn't going away. We are going to bring that idea back next year.

How can someone support your efforts or keep informed about them?

They should go to www.vtworkinglands.org. They can join the partnership, they can register to receive information, they can contribute. We will be reaching out to people to write to their legislators, to do commentaries and letters in the paper, to be partners with us in advancing this into the future. ■