

Summary

Meeting on Emerging Strategies for Agriculture for the State's Climate Action Plan

Tuesday, September 14th, from 6 to 8 PM

Background

On September 14, 2021 the Vermont Climate Council's Agriculture and Ecosystems Subcommittee held a public meeting focused on agriculture and food systems stakeholders. One-hundred-and-forty (140) participants joined via Zoom to participate in the meeting.

In the meeting, members of the Subcommittee shared:

- The strategies for helping Vermont farms and food system to be more resilient and adaptable in the face of climate change impacts;
- The ways Vermont agriculture can play an essential role in storing and sequestering carbon; and,
- The many co-benefits climate action can take for farm viability, healthy soils, increased biodiversity, water quality, and many others.

The Subcommittee sought to hear input on:

- What two or three strategies are you excited about and would be highly effective?
- What key strategies or ideas are missing?
- What two or three strategies or ideas are of concern or worry to you? How would you improve them to address your concerns?
- What help do you need to make the strategies relevant to you to be implemented?

The following is a written summary, without attribution, of the comments offered to the Subcommittee. These include both verbal comments made, comments made in the Zoom chat, and comments offered by nine (9) commenters via a Survey Monkey offered at the end of the meeting and filled out between September 14 and September 24. This is not intended to be a complete capture of each point made, but rather, a summary of the range of issues, ideas and concerns raised.

Findings

Broad Context

- Larger macro economy is missing from overall strategies: Vermont is not alone: others' actions, global commodity prices affect what and how we do here.

Overall Focus of Plan

- Soil health (also cools by reducing ground level radiation)
- Support and expand regenerative agriculture
- Energy transformation (EVs, solar, wind, weatherization, biodigesters, compost heating systems)

Equity

- Equity with technical assistance, access to programs, and strong outreach.
- Access to all programs including even non-commercial farmers.
- Update Use Value Appraisal program to encourage historically disadvantaged populations and to exclude mega farms.
- Make money available to those prospective farmers who cannot afford to buy land, working alongside VT Land Trust and similar organizations, to make farmland affordable.
- Land access, community land trusts, regarding food systems as a public "utility" (agricultural economist John Ikerd's concept).
- Address land grabbing, increase access to affordable housing, improve or increase on-farm housing, incentivize young and BIPOC farmers with access to land, training, and housing.
- Regulate large dairies which are not good for climate, equity, or animals.
- Support small farms, provide agricultural lands for farmers who can't afford to buy land, encourage organic agricultural practices without the use of synthetic fertilizers and pesticides
- Look to indigenous farmers and traditional systems. Support beekeepers and pollinators. Inclusion of BIPOC. Small scale family farms. Local food network, such as Regenerative Food Network.
- Re-create the commons. Share land to graze. Land to grow in different seasons. Farm with other families so that farmer burnout and injuries reduce farm losses.
- Universal childcare - farmers who choose to have children need to be able to send them somewhere safe while they're doing dangerous on farm jobs.
- Housing for farm workers - let's follow the lead of Migrant Justice.
- Let's translate our programs and offerings into different languages to actually be accessible.
- Let's reduce limitations on land conserved by VLT and make it more accessible and flexible to meet the changing needs of farmers.
- Let's make sure there are more beginning and transitioning farmer organizations / support staff to direct .
- Let's implement equipment sharing (like Lake Carmi manure injector model).
- We need to get internet out to rural areas. Farmers without internet cannot come to the table. They cannot be heard equitably. They cannot find out about meetings like this in time.

Scale

- Transition large industrial dairies to smaller regenerative agricultural farms, either dairies or other product categories. Large dairies and a healthy climate cannot coexist.
- Scale: don't forget the smaller farmers.
- A shift away from commodity production for large out-of-state companies (as has been the case with dairy) toward meeting state/regional needs; helping to (re)create a culture of growing, sharing, and preserving food
- Prevent mega-dairies from buying those farmers out. We need to keep Vermont farms and food production for Vermonters' consumption.
- Conventional farming: should this plan support it?
- Don't pit ag against itself

Land Use and Land Conservation

- Can we take marginal farmland and help convert it back to other natural functions?
- How are you addressing land grabs as Vermont becomes a climate refuge?
- Can we increase public lands across Vermont that everyone can co-manage and learn from?
- Public lands for farming/ag/forestry. Held by state or towns or co-ops.

- Rules that communities need to follow about keeping farmland open for farming. We do not need any more acreages sold for large scale housing.
- Explore new approaches like: *Common Land model*. <https://www.commonland.com/>.

Composting

- Utilize the local generation of food scraps to build community-based food scrap management through on farm composting, creating a value-added farm commodity and building local and regional markets for farm-based compost to help improve soil health.
- Promote food scrap diversion from landfills (reducing methane) and working with farmers to accept food scraps from their CSAs, farmers markets, and/or community for a small fee, and then composting the food scraps, with livestock manure and other on farm organic wastes in order to make a compost, a value-added commodity for farm use or sale.
- Has Act 148 been discussed as part of this? Organics diversion from landfill (GHG reductions) - composting to support farmland fertility, erosion control
- Promote on farm composting and greater use of compost and carbon for soil health, thriving plant life and soil microorganisms, and carbon sequestration.
- Develop greater awareness of the value of compost, how compost can be manufactured with low phosphorus, ways to use this locally produced resource.

Agriculture Products and Services

- Don't forget product like fiber (hemp and wool), honey and maple as part of the focus
- Consider ag materials as building materials that store carbon (straw bales)
- Consider pollination, allowing planting of native species that ensure pollinators

Local Food Hubs and Slaughterhouses

- Invest in local slaughterhouses allows more regenerative farming to arise – farming and markets are linked.
- Support more local food hubs, institutional purchases of local food.
- Support local food hubs - increasing access to local food will increase producers' ability to compete with large distributors, access more wholesale markets, and cut down on transporting food long distances.

Local Food and Markets

- Must maintain local production.
- New and different markets, kinds of farms, and ways of farming are all diversification for becoming more resilient.
- Prices have historically been so low forcing aggressive and intensive in use. This set's farmers up against nature. When farmers farm more in balance with nature this might decrease yields.
- Agriculture is part of the solution so we have to create a more farmer-friendly environment in Vermont.
- Provide access to capital for farmers practicing true regenerative agriculture
- Continue farm to table systems created in 2020 by pandemic. Local distribution of our production. During the pandemic, local groups and organizations, NOFA in particular, stepped up to help farmers and consumers connect, sometimes using the funds that were made available for Covid relief, to get local food. Let's build on that.
- Fully fund Farm 2 Plate. Access capital to support farmers.
- Better insurance.
- Feed Vermont school kids Vermont grown food.

- Ag products (& byproducts) as building materials.
- Let's dive in deeper into markets - can hospitals, schools, state agencies, prisons, etc. source more locally. They have to buy the food anyway, why not their neighbor farms?
- Local support of organic dairy farmers--reestablishing local distribution of the milk that our organic dairy farmers have recently lost.

Soil Health

- Use soil biology as fertilizers - compost teas, spraying milk, fermented bedded packs/ Trees, windrows, full season pollinator bloom time plantings between fields (along streams, ditches, property lines).
- Ensure farmers who rent land can actually afford to buy it so they invest in the health of the fields they're managing - it's a huge cost to invest in a field's soil health long term if you're renting and the landowner might pull it out to rent to someone else who can pay more.

Practices

- Keep going on practices that work: cover crops, buffer strips.
- Become more sophisticated with existing practices like grazing & cover cropping
- Broader uptake of crop insurance and tie crop insurance to better climate practices
- Consider moving away from govt. funded practices that are not climate friendly
- Manage incentives for buffers with loss of crop land that has unintended effects
- It would be good to take an approach like the one in Drawdown by Paul Hawken that calculates (or estimates) GHG reductions/sequestration for each specific practice
- Increase agroforestry
- Convert to Perennials--more cows on pasture!
- Employ holistic grazing of farm animals, particularly dairy cows, rather than confinement in barns, to incorporate their manure directly into the grasses to add to the health of the soil and increase in microbial load.
- River corridor easements--50' forested buffers
- Regenerative agricultural practices are my number one choice for sequestering carbon in the soil, reducing methane emissions, and reducing toxins in our food and water supply.
- Regenerative practices will increase the water holding capacity of the soil, thus reducing the damage from both drought and excessive precipitation.

Outcomes

- Create PES programs

Technical Assistance

- More technical assistance like students helping with PSN tests, as just one example.
- Farmer to farmer learning; teach farmers by farmers: farmer climate corps.
- Full funding of TA: UVM extension and other.
- Duplicate Intervale Center in every county across the state.
- Build the capacity of our on-the-ground organizations and fund the watershed farmer groups more, conservation districts, watershed associations, DEC, VAAFME engineers - we need more staff and resources to handle the needed changes in a SMART and efficient manner - with minimal paperwork and maximum payout.

Money

- Wetlands programs pay too little to be used.

- How long will actions that require long-term commitment actually be funded?
- Actions have to have monetary benefit: farms are businesses: need access to capital.
- Universal basic income for the climate friendly farmer.
- Funding priorities need to shift away from just Clean Water projects - we need to be funded to address climate change.

Programs

- Programs have to be flexible and inclusive; programs have to be easy to use
- Getting credit for first movers and early adopters
- Universal base income - like the CPS+ proposal to the PES working group. We need farmers. We need to pay them to steward land. We need to allow farmers to sell their goods in more ways (reduce restrictions around selling through other farms, selling direct to consumers, on farm slaughter and processing, ready-to-eat / value added products) allow farmers to create their own local markets to reduce the overall footprint and costs to get their food and products into people's homes.
- Shift some policies such as those on on-farm slaughter, to create conditions for farmers to diversify and provide more local food security.
- Create a program that links every family in Vermont to a local diverse farm so that when disasters happen.

Pesticides and Human-Manufactured Fertilizers

- Lack of attention to GMOs, pesticides, and herbicides
- Focus on the conditions that are conducive to building soil carbon: healthy, living soil and biodiversity. This means *drastically reducing* or eliminating pesticides, herbicides, fungicides, over-fertilizing.
- Reduce the use of all pesticides, especially glyphosate and atrazine, to improve the soil microbiome and reduce toxins in our food and water supply.
- Fertilizer often gets a pass in these conversations, but it's important to appreciate that nitrogen fertilizer is the climate version of double-dipping: producing it is hugely energy-intensive and much of what's applied volatiles to form a GHG that's more than 100X the heat-trapping of CO2. PLUS, it alters soil dynamics and therefore the building of soil carbon.

Additional Concerns or Comments

- Should we be disturbing the soil at all and funding such?
- More focus on reducing fossil fuels including plastic
- Has subsidization of the transition from diesel to electric implements been considered
- Most Vermonters our generations removed from farming – need consumer education