

Climate Action Input Session: Agriculture

Tuesday, November 12, 12:00-1:30pm

Summary of Input

*hosted by the Agriculture and Ecosystems Subcommittee
of the Vermont Climate Council*

Overview

The Vermont Climate Council is updating the state's Climate Action Plan (CAP). Subcommittees of the Council are holding a series of virtual public meetings to get input on their initial ideas for the update.

This document summarizes input during a session on November 12, 2024, focused on looking at how to reduce agricultural greenhouse gas emissions and increase carbon sequestration, support adaptation and economic viability for farms, and promote climate resilient practices in Vermont's agriculture sector. Approximately 50 people attended the 90-minute Zoom meeting. A participant list is included below.

This document is not a transcript of the session, but rather an overview of themes and ideas that participants provided verbally and in the chat.

The session began with a presentation of emerging ideas from the GHG Reduction and Sequestration, Support, Adaptation, Viability, Recovery, Economies, and Workforce, and the Climate Resilient Land Use Practices Task Groups of the Council's Agriculture and Ecosystems Subcommittee.

- View presentation [slides](#).
- Watch the Agriculture Input Session [recording](#).

Summary of input

High-level summary

At the end of the input session, participants were asked to answer the question, "what themes are jumping out?" Using a Menti link, they offered the short phrases as responses, which are grouped below.

Many comments focused on land access and food production

- Agricultural land access and adequate resources to support farming that land for the future.
- Land and quality soil availability, conservation and access in the face of a plummeting agricultural economy and pressures from the energy sector in the face of decarbonization
- Land access, support for farmers
- Support local regenerative food production through land access and resources

Several comments focused on ways to support farmers and farming

- Targeted funding to keep farmers in business.
- Direct support for farmers and farm viability
- Tax breaks for farmers
- Direct support for farmers and farms
- Push mandate re: resiliency and adaptation (land equity and access, healthcare, protecting farmworkers, anti-trust, animal power, food production as central to climate change, just livelihoods, etc)
- Set specific, concrete goals with shorter time-frames. Multi-solve: Agrivoltaics, Universal Basic Income (UBI) for regenerative/sustainable working land practices... all great ideas/examples Farmer/Forester designed solutions

Other comments focused on concerns related to renewable energy siting

- Important to protect agricultural lands from renewable resource siting, while also promoting the overall installation and use of renewables.
- Alternative/developed locations for renewable resources

Participants had other takeaways as well

- Importance of providing payments for ecosystem services, recognizing that land has more values besides just agricultural production.
- Holistic solution- agroecological frameworks
- Support capacity of our existing service delivery system
- Flood resiliency
- Intersection of climate mitigation, resilience, adaptation with water quality and biodiversity

Detailed summary by theme

Below is a more detailed summary of input provided verbally during the conversation and in the chat.

Supporting farmers and farmworkers

- What are your plans for supporting/protecting farm workers (dairy farmers, vegetable farmers, etc.) given recent political changes and the President-elect's plan to deport undocumented workers?
- Consider farmers, farmworkers, and foresters' quality of life – healthcare, childcare, elder care, and mental health in conversations about climate resilience.
- Continue reaching out to farmers, including their voices, and understanding how to best support them and acknowledge the structural limitations they face. They are good stewards of the land, and the economic system they work within is the reason that they are not able to store the land as well as they want to.
- The Universal Basic Income (UBI) program for farmers who adopt organic regenerative practices and soil health practices is a great program. Healthcare, dental care, childcare, etc. could be built into a UBI along with the technical service providers, grants, and potentially regional price support as well. We don't necessarily have to be talking about direct payments to farmers from the State, but rather we can build out a lot of these supportive programs. In many ways, this transition to soil health practices in the long-term should also improve the bottom line of farmers.
 - There is lots of movement and research around Universal Basic Services in the UK as an alternative approach to UBI.
- A lot is expected of our farmers and they will need far more assistance to survive economically. As a farm business advisor, it is incredibly hard for farmers to make a living.
- Need to change at the base level what is valued most. Farmers should be paid and funded by the State and supported by public banks as state workers who are crucial to the public health and future of our children.
- What does integrating climate-related education at all levels mean? Is it climate related or is it about agriculture and working lands - teaching people how to be foresters, farm, and harvest wild foods and medicinals?

Supporting farm viability

- What are more significant regulatory steps we can take to push the envelope in terms of farm viability? No matter how much money we can throw at this, property values are beyond the ability for people to access, even with some financial help – and that is just for new people, let alone people trying to survive in a tough agricultural economy with floods.
- Farms are a climate solution, a food security solution, and an economic vitality solution. Supporting farm viability and helping young people get on the lands is urgent if we want the land to be making our communities more resilient.

Adopting an agroecological approach

- Why isn't agroecology being discussed related to climate resilient land use practices? The Institute for Agroecology at University of Vermont is thriving and is already doing work to braid together traditional Western science and traditional and indigenous knowledge. Please connect with the Institute and raise awareness of their research on increased resilience and increased success with climate adaptation and climate mitigation on agroecological farms.
 - The technical assistance actions do already include the UVM extension and there could be a great opportunity to incorporate the Institute.
- Need to fuse traditional, indigenous knowledge about ecology with what we are doing now in order to make real progress.
- We should make our existing agricultural acres wildly more productive than they currently are in order to effect a truly-systems level transition of the agricultural sector to embrace agroecological principles and practices. As the New England Feeding New England projections suggest that we need thousands of more acres, we would also be restoring soil health and biodiversity as well as addressing ecological overshoot (greenhouse gas emissions can be seen as the symptom of our predicament as human beings in ecological overshoot with our habitat).
- The agricultural agroecology approach will be more labor-intensive than the industrial agricultural model that dominates Vermont. We will need more young people to join the cause, and we will need to make it apparent that they can make a Vermont living wage doing this essential labor. Many farmers now have to go into debt in order to keep operating.

Floodplains and flood resilience

- Managing riparian lands for flood resiliency is extremely important, as extreme flood events are increasing.

- One of the best investments Vermont can make for both flood resiliency and water quality is to provide farmers with adequate compensation to get agricultural production out of the floodplain. At Vermont Housing & Conservation Board (VHCB), we provided funding to US Fish and Wildlife Service to acquire agricultural floodplain parcels, which will now be managed for wildlife, habitat, and flood resiliency.
 - While there are impacts in the floodplain, it is also a significant resource to farmers as agriculture originated from the floodplains and that is where the most productive soils are.
 - Historically, river valleys and floodplains have been places of great agricultural fertility but what does the testing overtime reveal about the chemicals and heavy metals carried by these bodies? What does research show about how we would be able to deal with those and how that affects the nutritive value of food or potential contamination of food or livestock?

Alignment with pre-existing programs

- As someone who works with private landowners in the agriculture and forestry sector, I have seen many activities and practices happening on private lands that do benefit the climate.
- There is still opportunity to do work that benefits the climate using existing programs. Until we change the system and have something different to work with, there are programs in place that could help landowners.
- There are a lot of other plans and initiatives happening in Vermont – to what extent were these referenced in developing priorities (i.e. clean water work through Act 76, tactical basin plans, etc.)?
 - Making sure priorities are deployed in ways that are compatible with other priorities in the environment is a foundation of the emissions reduction approach. For water-based priorities, the Water Quality Division at the Institute of Agriculture ensures that the funding distributed to farmers to implement conservation practices that have co-benefits for climate resilience and greenhouse gas mitigation is also aligned with other priorities/ organizations' work.
- When plans are developed, we sometimes run into issues executing the actions items due to lack of capacity. Have you had conversations about this? To what extent would this plan call for directing funding strategically into pre-existing programs or to what extent would this require the development of brand new programs that would need to be rolled out at the state level?

- From the perspective of the Support, Adaptation, Viability, Recovery, Economies, and Workforce Task Group, we are definitely prioritizing strategies and actions that are looking to enhance existing programs, organizations, and delivery mechanisms. Something else that we've talked about as a full subcommittee is that we feel we have a strong service-provider system in place, and that anything we develop implies an additional level of service or expertise, and we need to fund at that appropriate level (i.e. we have named conservation districts as an entity to provide increased funding for as one action).
 - We appreciate the conservation districts being named in this and the emphasis of funding existing service delivery structures here in the State.
- The CAP ag strategies would be a good presentation topic for the Ag Water Quality Partnership annual meeting this winter.

Challenges related to land access

- Community resilience and climate adaptation can have broad interpretations. When farmworkers and young farmers in particular think about resilience, it's about their bottom line. When we think about the future of climate change, land is the big question.
- The New England Feeding New England projections of needing hundreds of thousands more acres of land in production in New England to even meet 30% of our region's food resilience by 2030, yet farmers can't get access to land and they certainly can't have long-term tenure or ownership. Most are leasing land. Many young farmers studying agriculture are worrying about how they will ever make enough money working at a farm to save up for their own farms, let alone pay off their student loans.
- Do you have any new ideas for improving land access? That remains to be a problem for beginning farmers and for older people who want to get back into farming. Having more farms would also increase the amount of carbon sequestration.
- What are recommendations around regulatory solutions for land, specifically for changing it from a capital-based system to a community rights and community sovereignty-based system?
 - Some of the big international climate agendas are threatening human rights, food and land sovereignty, and community control over resources. Is there a food sovereignty plan and what are the details? The subcommittee needs to look at these land questions as fundamental to the task moving forward.
 - Climate change is an equity and structural power issue. Need to think critically about carbon markets and other concepts because they may make matters worse (i.e. electricity emissions being offset by renewable energy credits - the same

ones that are bringing multi-state operators in to displace farmers by taking that land).

- The Vermont Pension Investment Committee invested 100 million dollars of Vermonters' Pension in a subsidiary that has been found to be land grabbing around the world. If we are focused on climate resilience and agriculture, our State's investments outside of Vermont should also reflect this. The Climate Action Plan could be helpful in this process, and could even generate more radical conversations about public banks and other ways of generating our own income to support farmers.

Renewable energy siting and the competition for agricultural land

- I'm concerned about the competition for land use between renewable energy projects, namely solar operations, agricultural land use, and sometimes forests. The solar siting law was last revised in 2014, so we need to review what is and is not working. The law has proven to be inadequate to protect our best agricultural soils, and is also interfering with farmland access. VT is falling behind other states in addressing these conflicts and developing policy, criteria, and regulation, including defining what constitutes agrivoltaics and when agrivoltaics are appropriate and well-designed and not just "greenwashing." All solar projects should have some sort of dual use under them whether that is agriculture, wildlife habitat, or pollinators.
 - The energy siting conflict - balancing the need for renewable energy production and food production is a real challenge that the subcommittee is thinking about.
- Incentivize and consider mandating solar and wind capacity on new buildings as well as in previously disturbed or developed areas and avoid and minimize forest clearing for renewables through incentives and other siting policies, rules, and regulations.
- Efficiency Vermont unfortunately can't address concerns around energy generation/siting, but is happy to be in contact with any type of agricultural enterprises and perform on-farm energy assessments to find opportunities to increase efficiency and hopefully complete projects which increase resilience for power systems and lower bills, and to connect the customer with more funding resources across the State for energy efficiency projects. Reach out at dany@veic.org. Also, more than happy to connect with any interested members of this subcommittee to engage in technical/strategic conversations on farm energy projects.
- Efficiency VT offers great programs for farmers, but there needs to be additional financial assistance and technical support for a wider array of technologies and infrastructure for reducing energy use on farms, the greater electrification of agricultural equipment including delivery trucks and vans, and the production of renewable energy

on the farm for the purpose of meeting farm energy needs. More farms would take more steps in this direction if capital was not a barrier.

Other suggestions and questions specifically for the revised Climate Action Plan

- A lot of the work seems to be based on this greenhouse gas emissions story which is inherently flawed, and the subcommittee should look at the larger directives as holistically as possible.
- Does the Agriculture section of the CAP include greenhouse gas savings from local food production instead of importing food?
- I hope the eventual plan will make quantitative estimates of the percent of animals or acres that have had mitigation strategies implemented as well as the resulting contribution of each of these measures to the desired reduction in CO2 emissions.
- Appreciate that agroforestry is being included.

Participants

Jake Claro, Evan Horne, Ryan Patch, Emily Finnegan, Nancy LaRowe, Elisa Clancy, Nathanael Johns, Jaiel Pulskamp, Max Saylor, Amber Perry, Marli Rupe, Adam Aguirre, Liz Amler, Margo Ghia, Judson Peck, Stephanie Boucher, Stephen Leslie, Allie Webster, Charlie Ansley, Lee King, Chris Smith, Margaret Fowle, Katharyn Hassan, Andrew Milliken, Graham Unangst-Rufenacht, John Van Hoesen, Erica Hiller, Nora Brown, Billy Coster, Ari Lattanzi, Molly Anderson, Duncan Murdoch, Clare Ireland, Mike Ghia, Katherine Lee Goyette, Eric DeLuca, Kristin Blodgett, Mariah Noth, Hilary Solomon, Richard Hopkins, Kristan Doolan, Charlotte Rosendahl, Mary Perchlik, Alissa White, Alli Lewis, Dany Boyle, Pam Bryer, Lindsey Ruhl, Albert Sabatini, David Plumb (facilitator), Charlotte Goodman (facilitator)