

Vermont Citizens Advisory Committee (VTCAC) on Lake Champlain's Future

Monday March 8th, 2021

5:00 pm – 7:00 pm

MEETING SUMMARY

Committee Members Present: Mark Naud (Chair), Bill Howland (Vice-Chair), Eric Clifford, Wayne Elliott, Lori Fisher, Sen. Ginny Lyons, David Mears, Rep. Carole Ode, Hilary Solomon, Jeff Wennberg

Committee Members Absent: Sen. Randy Brock, Bob Fischer, Rep. Leland Morgan

LCBP Staff in Attendance: Sarah Coleman (VTANR), Katie Darr, Eric Howe, Lauren Jenness, Elizabeth Lee

Speakers: Ellen Kahler, Executive Director of the Vermont Sustainable Jobs Fund

Public Guests: Jeff Carter, Ricky Laurin, Crea Lintilhac, Vic Putman, Nat Shambaugh

Meeting summary by Katie Darr, Lake Champlain Basin Program (LCBP)

5:00 – 5:20 pm

Welcome and Introductions – Mark Naud

Mark welcomed everyone in attendance and reminded the group that the meeting will be recorded. He asked Sen. Lyons and Rep. Ode to provide an update on the legislature.

Public Comments

No public comments were made.

Review and vote on Draft February 8th VTCAC Meeting Summary – Mark Naud

Lori Fisher moved to approve the meeting summary. Wayne Elliot seconded. The motion was approved unanimously.

Update on the Legislative Activity in the Senate – Sen. Lyons

The Act 250 bill is in the Senate. It probably will not make crossover but there is still work ongoing. Most of the work that is going on in Natural Resources and Energy has been on a new expanded weatherization program. Act 250 is on hiatus to give more time for thought given where we are in Covid.

A bill that relates to providing food and farm-to-plate linkages with schools, so that all kids have all meals at schools, passed out of Senate Agriculture is now in Senate Education. The Education Committee is looking at that and then it has implications for appropriations. Sen. Lyons believes it will make it to the House.

Bill H89 is an agritourism bill that Sen. Lyons has worked on for the past 2-3 sessions. It would provide some protection for agritourism in the State. It would allow for some signage where there are corn mazes, markets, and agritourism events, and would provide for liability insurance that has been too expensive in the past. As the bill came over from the House, it received unanimous approval from those testifying including the Farm Bureau and the Vermont Bar Association. Bill H89 provides a terrific opportunity for expanding economic opportunities for the agricultural sector.

Most of the Legislature's focus has been on pandemic-related issues, expanding voting opportunities, changing town meeting, and so on.

Update on Legislative Activity in the House – Rep. Ode

The Vermont Agriculture and Food Systems Strategic Plan has been released. The “big book” contains 54 product marketing issue briefs which will be a go-to resource for the next decade. Online at vtfarmtoplate.com/plan/

In Water Quality, H108 is clarifying a long-time interpretation and practice that Vermont’s water quality standards apply to all surface waters including rivers, lakes, ponds, and wetlands. The bill updates the state’s Clean Water Act section 401 provision to help the state better manage large projects that may discharge to Vermont’s surface waters, including projects subject to a federal permit or license. There is a huge focus on supporting and enhancing wildlands and intact forests. The House Natural Resources Fish and Wildlife Committee is looking at how New Hampshire and Maine are supporting that. Rep. Ode has attended national conferences and there is a huge focus on the 30x30 goal, protecting 30% of land by 2030 and 50% by 2050.

A bill that has moved out of the House Natural Resources and into House Ways and Means is a new bottle bill. It proposes to charge 10 cents instead of 5 cents and to expand the containers that would be covered to liquor, PET plastics, and glass. There are some issues, but the idea is that the highest use of glass is to have a refillable bottle and then recyclable because can be used multiple times if it is clean enough. Due to the way we currently collect glass, it gets mixed up with other items and it is hard to have it be clean enough.

5:20 – 6:20 pm

2030 Farm to Plate VT Agriculture and Food System Strategic Plan – Ellen Kahler

Ellen provided an overview of the [2030 Farm to Plate VT Agriculture and Food System Strategic Plan](http://vtfarmtoplate.com/plan/). Her presentation covered the history and legislative outcomes guiding the plan’s development and implementation process, stakeholder engagement that went into writing the plan, and the goals, objectives, priority strategies, and product, market and issue briefs of interest to the VTCAC. A discussion about some of the opportunities for the VTCAC to support the Farm to Plate network particularly as the Governor’s Commission on the Future of Vermont Agriculture is being formed followed the presentation. The upper righthand corner of each slide indicates where those components are in the plan document.

History of the Farm to Plate Program: In 2009 VT State Legislature requested that the VT Sustainable Jobs Fund put together the Farm to Plate Investment Program. At that time there were 3 legislative outcomes: (1) to increase sustainable economic development, (2) create jobs in Vermont’s food and farm sector, and (3) improve access to healthy local foods for all Vermonters. The first plan was released in 2011 and the Farm to Plate Network was launched a few months later. The Farm to Plate Network consists of organizations working collaboratively to implement the plan.

In 2019, the Legislature reauthorized VT Farm to Plate for another 10 years, updated the legislative outcomes, and tasked the program with creating another 10-year plan. The three legislative outcomes reflect sustainability goals to be economically successful, environmentally sound, and socially just: (1) increase sustainable economic development and create jobs in Vermont’s food and farm sector, (2) improve soils, water, and resiliency of the working landscape in the face of climate change, and (3) improve access to healthy local foods for all Vermonters.

Within the plan itself, there are 4 goal categories. Three of them align directly with the legislative outcomes and VT Farm to Plate added a fourth category around racial equity with the increasing awareness of making our food system racially just and equitable.

Strategic Plan Highlights: The Environmental Sustainability Goals related to water quality, preparing for climate change adaptation, land use and decision making, and promoting a strong and viable food system are most relevant to the VTCAC’s goals and interests. The plan provides an example indicator for each of the goals. Each of the objectives will have a corresponding set of indicators to provide a sense of whether we are achieving the goals. The product, market, and issue briefs are 2–4-page snapshots that provide a synopsis of current conditions, a discussion of bottlenecks, gaps, and opportunities, and 4-6 expert recommendations about what should be prioritized over the next decade. Product briefs that may be of interest to the VTCAC include Agroforestry (p. 41), Dairy (p. 55), and Grass-Fed Beef (p.71). Issue briefs of interest include Agritourism (p.133), Alternative Land Ownership and Access Models (p.135), Climate Change (p. 143), Farmland Conservation (p.149), Land Use Planning (p. 167), Payment for Ecosystem Services (p. 173), Succession (p. 179), Supporting Future Farmers (p. 181), and Water Quality (p. 187).

What Happens Next? Currently, the Farm to Plate Network is aligned around the recommendations and strategies from the first plan. Now the Network needs to reorganize and realign around the priority strategies in the new plan. The VTCAC

and Farm to Plate Network can explore where there are points of connectivity and synergy for our networks to amplify what each group is working on, especially as it relates to water quality, soil health, agricultural practices, and a healthy environment for local foods.

- David Mears noted that many of the recommendations related to clean water, watershed health, and soil health are still heavily dependent on doing more information gathering, assessment, and analysis. Recognizing that the Vermont public is eager to see stronger, more forceful changes, he asked if there are ways that the Vermont state legislature should be creating new systems to support farmers and creating new or different economically positive forms of farming that may also have environmental benefits?
 - Ellen responded affirmatively and directed the group to the economic goals and objectives in the plan. She noted that when tasked by the Legislature to make this plan, they were asked to look at the whole food system including conventional, organic, grass-based, farms, food manufacturers, distributors, retail outlets, etc. She explained the changes we are seeing from Covid, including the realization that the concentration in production, processing, and distribution has made our food system vulnerable to major shocks including the pandemic and climate change. Our food system needs a diversity of approaches and products and the plan contains objectives related to expanding the percentage of other products produced in Vermont recognizing that the market and consumer demand is changing. A lot of the plan focuses on succession. Who is the next generation of farmers and what do they want to do? How do we support that as we move forward? The intent of the briefs is to capture what has transpired, what are the trends suggesting, and how do we position VT to be a stronger producer and marketplace for a more diversified, and in some cases more regenerative food system.
- Mark Naud asked how Ellen sees the next steps of implementing the plan and how the plan might inform the work of the new Governor’s Commission on the Future of Vermont Agriculture?
 - Ellen recognized the Agency of Agriculture’s role in developing the plan including reviewing all of the briefs and recommendations and adding substantive improvements to the documents. She shared that the Governor’s Commission came from a desire to prioritize the many recommendations and documents that have resulted from various planning processes over the year. The intention in creating the Governor’s Commission was to synthesize and create a set of recommendations that the governor can explore in a timeline that the administration could incorporate into the annual budget cycle as well as getting prepared for the next legislative session. It provides an opportunity for a smaller subset of experts to show the Governor what to prioritize in the upcoming years. The larger Farm to Plate Network will have recommendations to give to Governor’s Commission for their consideration. Ellen predicts there will be lots of interplay and back and forth between existing groups and the Governor’s Commission, including the VTCAC.
- Mark Naud asked Ellen if there were components of the Strategic Plan or recommendations that the VTCAC might highlight when presenting the VT Action Plan to the Legislature.
 - Ellen identified the investment in natural and developed infrastructure and investment in the agricultural transition to sustainability priorities to be well aligned with components in the Strategic Plan, especially technical assistance to communities if farmers and other types of food-related businesses are involved in those communities. Across the 276 recommendations, there were 33 new full-time equivalent technical and business assistance providers that the contributing authors felt were needed to meet the demand for technical assistance. She added that anything that the VTCAC could say that could amplify that need for technical assistance would be terrific, particularly as it relates to urban and rural infrastructure improvements for water quality, soil health, sensor technologies, and other similar areas. Related to the investment in the agricultural transition to sustainability, the plan explores alternative models of agriculture and ownership and highlights the need for technical expertise for transitions. Ellen noted that they anticipate seeing an increasing number of dairy farms wanting to transition and it is important to ensure there is enough assistance to help farmers and food entrepreneurs adapt to the changing marketplace and make the transitions as they want to make them.
- Rep. Carol Ode asked if it is possible to partner with the VT Bar Association for succession planning to see if some retired lawyers could potentially do that work pro bono.
 - Ellen explained that the Sustainable Jobs Fund does not get into that level of detail, but she would pass that suggestion onto others doing the actual succession planning work, including Vermont Land Trust and

UVM Extension. She added that there are not enough lawyers who have experience in understanding the complexities of transitioning working farmers to the next generation to meet the current level of need.

- Ricky Laurin asked if wind farms and solar are taking away farmland in Vermont like it is in New York.
 - Ellen noted that wind farms are not and there is not as much pressure on farmland with solar as there was 5 years ago. She highlighted that it is possible to site solar and wind farms in a way that is beneficial and complementary to farming. Some farms have wind turbines on the farm. If solar panels are set up higher, sheep can graze, and wildflowers can be grown for bees and pollinators resulting in a win-win-win for farmers, wildlife, and the environment. As our awareness of these technologies grows, we can explore how renewable energy can happen on these farms in a way that does not detract from our ability to produce food for ourselves moving forward.

6:20-7:00

Legislative Committee Presentations Planning Discussion – Mark Naud

Senator Lyons noted that crossover is Friday, March 12th. Bills from policy committees will go to the Senate floor or finance or appropriations committees where they have an additional week to finalize, review, and approve.

Mark asked members to think about their availability during the week of the 22nd-26th for presentations and notify him and Katie of their availability and interest in presenting. He will work with Sarah Coleman and Emily Bird to slot in times. There is more flexibility this year because all of the meetings do not need to occur on the same day.

Wayne asked for clarification on the virtual format. Mark clarified that a few members would conduct the presentation with a few more engaged and available to provide strength in numbers as having more members present has worked in the past. The Action Plan will be sent ahead of time as a pdf and there will be some printed to have available for LCBP and other organizations. Sarah Coleman added that there is no minimum print quantity, so we just need to print a quantity that makes sense.

Review of the Print Ready Proof of the VTCAC Action Plan – Mark Naud

The committee discussed the final, print-ready version of the VTCAC Action Plan. A committee member had two comments on the enforcement section and next generation toxins sections. The committee discussed wording changes to clarify the intent of those sections. Mark, Katie, and Lauren made minor adjustments based on the consensus heard around the adjustments for next generation toxics to specify issues with the State's database, language concerning the termination of the MOU until a viable alternative is identified, and clarification that technical assistance for compliance should be part of the focus of VTAAF. A new draft of the document reflecting these changes was distributed to committee members for their approval via email on March 9th.

Discussion on the motion: Two members expressed concern that the VTCAC previously voted with a quorum and unanimity to approve the earlier language and agreed that we would not make further wording changes after sending it to be designed.

The revised Action Plan was approved via email.

Meeting Wrap-Up Discussion – Mark Naud

The next meeting is on April 12th. **Mark reminded members to be in touch with him and Katie as soon as possible about their availability for and interest in Legislative Committee presentations.** Bill Howland moved to adjourn. Eric Clifford seconded.