

Vermont Conservation Strategy Initiative – Agriculture Working Group
Meeting #4, February 7 2024, 11 am – 1 pm on Zoom
Meeting Notes

Notes taken by Holly McClintock, VHCB.

Co-Chair and facilitator: Stacy Cibula (VHCB)

Co-Chair: Ryan Patch (VAAFAM)

In attendance:

- Graham Unangst-Rufenacht (Rural Vermont)
- Isaac Bissell (VHCB)
- Dave Blodgett (NRCS)
- Jennifer Byrne (White River Natural Resources Conservation District)
- Eric Clifford (Dairy Farmer, Champlain Valley Farmer Coalition)
- Stephen Leslie (Cedar Mountain Farm, Vermont Healthy Soils Coalition)
- Scott Magnan (Franklin/Grand Isle Farmers Watershed Alliance)
- Holly McClintock (VHCB)
- Jen Miller (NOFA-VT)
- Rosalyn Renfrew (VT F&W)
- Marli Rupe (ANR-DEC)
- Michael Snow (CRWFA)

Stacy notifies the group that the recordings and notes from these working group meetings will be publicized on the VCSI website: [Vermont Conservation Strategy Initiative | Vermont Housing & Conservation Board \(vhcb.org\)](https://www.vhcb.org)

The website also details the upcoming public meetings for the various working groups. The Agriculture Roundtable will be held on March 12th, from 6:00pm – 8:00pm.

Report from Science and Policy Meeting and Review of Act 59 (Stacy Cibula and Isaac Bissell)

Before reporting out from the January 29th Science and Policy Group Meeting, Stacy recapped the intentions of goals of the Science and Policy Group (S&P) for context. S&P is intended to be a grassroots approach to writing the report to the legislature, synthesizing the recommendations from the working groups. Their meetings are used as an opportunity to ask questions, share feedback, and collect recommendations, updates, and advancements from the Working Groups to consider as S&P moves forward with the report. Stacy shares a full list of S&P members in the meeting chat:

- Trey Martin, VHCB
- Stacy Cibula, VHCB
- Bill Dell’Isola, VHCB
- Billy Coster, ANR (Department of Environmental Conservation)
- John Austin, ANR (Fish & Wildlife)
- Rosalind Renfrew, ANR (Fish & Wildlife)
- Bob Zaino, ANR (Fish and Wildlife)
- Will Duane, ANR (Fish & Wildlife)

- Gannon Osborne, ANR (Forests, Parks, and Recreation)
- Hannah Phillips, ANR (Forests, Parks, and Recreation)
- Keith Thompson, ANR (Forests, Parks, and Recreation)
- Gunnar Nurme, ANR (Forests, Parks, and Recreation)
- Becca Washburn, ANR (Forests, Parks, and Recreation)
- Jillian Liner, Audubon
- Steve Hagenbach, Audubon
- Gus Goodwin, TNC
- Jim Shallow, TNC
- Lauren Oates, TNC
- Clare Ireland, Vermont Association of Conservation Districts
- Kate Wanner, Trust for Public Land
- Abby White, Vermont Land Trust

The 1/29/24 meeting was not recorded, but notes are available.

At the S&P meeting, Stacy shared the results of the Ag Working Group's (AWG) baseline survey, reporting that the results trend toward including all conserved agricultural land as meeting the goals of Act 59. Stacy clarified with S&P that this is a baseline inclination, and the group has not yet voted or reached consensus.

Stacy reported that S&P had some reservations toward this, based on their interpretation of biodiversity. For example, whereas some members of the AWG believe that the absence of development in and of itself promotes biodiversity, S&P generally does not agree with that broadly inclusive approach. They generally believe that biodiversity can vary greatly across agricultural land, so what should be counted in the inventory should be determined by evaluating on a parcel, or sub-parcel, level.

Stacy asked Rosalind Renfew to speak on behalf of the Conversation Categories working group (CCG), since they recently suggested to S&P the addition of two new categories for the report. The three that are already defined are: 1) Ecological Reserve Areas, Biodiversity Conservation Areas, and 3) Natural Resource Management Areas. The two additional categories that the CCG has recommended adding include one designated solely for agriculture, and one for "other lands" (i.e., recreational lands, or lands that may not directly enhance biodiversity, but have community importance, such as a town park or ballfield).

Roz said that the conversations within the CCG have gotten down to a philosophical level, but ultimately, their thinking is that conserved agricultural land is fundamentally different than most other types of conserved land (natural lands, or forested lands, for example), which justifies a different category altogether; the group found it difficult to synthesize agriculture within the existing three. A separate category will be better able to represent agriculture's unique contributions to biodiversity, community resilience, and food security, among others, as well as the naturally variable levels of potential conversion and management.

The CCG's recommendation was not intended to be based in personal values, but, agricultural land does simply speak to a different set of values. Forested and ecological reserve lands contribute a set of benefits that agriculture doesn't, but the same is true the other way around.

Isaac shared his screen to go over the language in the legislation, providing a high level discussion on the framing of Act 59 and what the group is actually being tasked to do. As a reminder, it is a two-phased approach. First, an inventory of all of Vermont's conserved lands and policies is due July 1st, 2024, to answer the question of "how do we make a plan?".

The legislation explicitly states that the inventory includes *"criteria [that] shall be developed to determine the types of agricultural lands that will qualify as supporting and restoring biodiversity and therefore count toward the natural resource management category."*

Even with the directive to place agriculture within the natural resource management category, there is a broader question in the Act of whether or not those categories even work. The CCG is suggesting that the framework of those existing categories do not work for agriculture. Ultimately, this strays the AWG away from the question about which farmland should be counted in the Natural Resource Area category, specifically.

Instead, the question the AWG is now tasked to answer is which agricultural land may be counted in the newly suggested "farmland supporting biodiversity" category, versus not counting at all, or falling in the "other lands" category, which is for all of the conserved land that does not necessarily support biodiversity.

Isaac also says the legislation is written in a way that leaves the opportunity for agriculture to be seen as "supporting or complementing" the core concepts, without fully fitting within them.

Isaac suggests three paths forward (*pulled directly from the slide, available on the VCSI website: [All 2-7-24 Meeting Slides.pdf \(vhcb.org\)](#)*):

1. *Divide conserved agricultural parcels up into acreage that will permanently "support and restore biodiversity" and land that could be converted to uses inconsistent with supporting and restoring biodiversity, and provide a justification for how we determined which lands will permanently support and restoring biodiversity.*
2. *Recommend that all conserved agricultural lands will permanently support and restore biodiversity, and provide a justification for this position.*
3. *Recommend that all agricultural lands be included towards the 30x30 goals as a complementary category, and provide a justification for this position. This would likely involve defending both the biodiversity benefits of some acreage and the complementary climate resilience benefits of other acreage.*

This concluded Isaac's report.

There was a worry expressed that in making these decisions, people will either feel like they “count” or “don’t count”, and if they don’t, they’re not important. This dichotomy is important to steer away from, because the overarching vision is not strictly to reach 30% by 2030, but rather to strengthen community resilience and biodiversity – the number is a means to an end. The goal shouldn’t be just to reach 30% for the sake of the exercise, but rather to find ways to enhance community resilience and biodiversity. This is the danger with focusing too much on 30% and putting land into categories.

There was a question about where forest management fits in. Roz responded that the CCG, as opposed to placing types of land in buckets themselves, is to *assist* in defining terms by providing guidance, using a matrix comprising of the following criteria: 1) What is the intent of the piece of land, 2) what is the intensity of the management, 3) how durable is the protection.

Going off of that, the question remains for where managed forests fall, especially since human intervention and management has been critically important for the growth and development of some woodlots. There are species, such as the white-tailed deer, whose habitats are naturally suited to a diverse environment that includes open agricultural lands and forest edges.

Ryan mentioned the Payment for Ecosystem Services Working Group, which spent a long time using science and public input to calculate the biodiversity contribution of agricultural land. His understanding is that humans are not distinct from biodiversity and the natural world; we are embedded in it and our means of interacting with the land, such as the land we use to feed ourselves, is part of the natural contribution of a healthy landscape and those who live on it. With that perspective, he fundamentally challenges the notion that agriculture can never contribute to biodiversity based on its level of management—if agriculture is being thrown out for its management, then by that argument, managed forests should be, too.

There was a clarification that agriculture isn’t being thrown out, but rather being evaluated to determine how to define and categorize how it is contributing, as it is distinct from other land types.

Another group member spoke up to share their concern with cataloging agriculture in a separate category, which will leave it open to a wider conception that it doesn’t contribute to biodiversity. Another concern highlighted is that, beyond biodiversity, there is a critical need for agricultural land for the sake of food security.

A member spoke up and expressed that they worried about the member of the member of the S&P group who said that they believed that no agricultural land contributed to biodiversity. This group member’s understanding is that the S&P group will be the one making the decisions, and worries that the differing perspective of the AWG will not be considered. This member also goes on to agree that our landscape looks the way it does because of humans’ actions from the past, and in some instances, human intervention may be important to maintaining the balance of an ecosystem. In reference to Ryan’s white-tailed deer comment above, they state that there are many areas with an unsustainable population of white-tailed deer that is detrimental to the overall health of the habitat, and kept the forest from regrowing properly. In these instances, human intervention is important for maintaining the ecosystem’s homeostasis.

Including all agriculture allows for future flexibilities in circumstances that we may not even be able to conceptualize yet. There is no way for the decision makers to know now, how the land will look in seven generations. It's important for the people making decisions to understand that even with their best efforts and knowledge, they will not get it right for the perpetual future, so they must grant leeway and flexibilities to better serve or consider future social and ecological conditions.

Stacy clarified the role of the Science and Policy Group: A sounding board for the working groups and providing structure for the format of how the initiative is being run. It's not a decision-making body, but another bank of information and input that will inform the final report.

Isaac says that the S&P didn't have a concern with agricultural land itself, but rather, the concern was in the detrimental agricultural practices that may occur on conserved lands (i.e., spraying pesticides). An agricultural easement protects the land from development, but in the majority of cases, does not regulate the practices that are occurring, so S&P questions whether or not it can count as conserved. To that, he notes that only 45% of the conserved agricultural land in the last ten years is tillable, and so the 55% that isn't tillable land is very unlikely to be subject to those detrimental practices that the S&P group is concerned by.

An individual expressed confusion over the larger purpose of this effort, and questions why so much attention is being drawn here, when there are so many other conservation initiatives happening throughout the state that could benefit from the level of exposure and discussion that Act 59 is receiving.

Ryan states that this is important because it may inform where funding for conservation may be directed and prioritized in the future. The purpose of this group in particular is to determine where agriculture falls in the context of the bill.

The individual also expressed confusion with how Act 59 defines biodiversity, and remarks that many farms are incredibly diverse in terms of insects or microbes as compared to some forested land. They're frustrated that other environmental initiatives, such as the Environmental Justice Council, don't get the same amount of effort even though they were asked to operate on a similarly short timeline.

A group member believed that there should be some amount of flexibility in the definition of "conversion" in the agricultural sphere, given that overly restrictive conservation can limit the viability of farms in the long-term.

The group breaks for 10 minutes.

Ryan shares his screen to discuss the history of agriculture in the state, and the rate of change in the proportion of agricultural land in Vermont. The slides are available on the VCSI website: [All 2-7-24 Meeting Slides.pdf \(vhcb.org\)](#)

To summarize:

- 94% of Vermont is covered by natural and working lands, and more specifically, 12% of the state is agricultural land. 93.6% of the cropland in Vermont is used as forage for animals, largely dairy farms.
- Farmers manage over half a million acres of woodland (42.2% of total “agricultural land”).
- Act 250 reports have had less of an emphasis on agricultural land over time, and less representation from farmers themselves. Accordingly, the amount of agricultural land in the state has declined.
- Climate change will impact Vermont in many ways; it’s important to keep food security and self-sufficiency in mind. We are currently getting most of our food from parts of the country that will be at risk of other climate impacts (such as water stress or extreme heat), so it’s especially important that New England is able to maintain enough agricultural land to provide for ourselves.
- Agricultural soils in Vermont are limited, as are lands that are naturally suitable for agriculture (39% of agricultural land is within a “critical resource area”), and they’re continuing to decrease in availability.

One group member noted that the stated goal of the Act 59 is biodiversity, and if the report embraces that, including *all* agriculture in the inventory could water down what it really means to enhance biodiversity. There is a palpable tension of making sure as much farmland as possible is conserved for the sake of food security, while also honoring the Act’s original intent. Another member mentions that this holistic (and critical) conversation around farmland access, land use, and funding, that the group keeps raising, and seems to want to be having, may be different from the conversation that the legislature is asking for.

Isaac remarked that the Act does leave some space for adjacent benefits, and we shouldn’t need to pigeonhole ourselves into anything. As mentioned before, 45% of agricultural land is tillable land, and 55% is something else. One potential example of distinguishing between different types of ag that would “count” may be looking at tillable soils vs. non-tillable soils. He also mentions that the group has very limited time together, and it may be worth doing work outside of meetings to prepare something for the group to react to in the discussion space.

A group member asked about the intention of opening up the group to the public, especially given that there’s some discussion and disagreement around what some of these terms (such as “biodiversity”) might mean in the larger context of the Act. The response is that the public involvement is in the name of transparency, and trying to involve as many interested stakeholders as possible.

There was another mention of the PES working group, and a request to learn more about the work that was done in that group and how that may overlap with this.

A group member spoke to his experience as a farmer, and the importance of caring for the health and biodiversity on lands that are so important not only ecologically, but economically. The charge of all working lands going forward should embrace this for an ecological (and economic) regenerative future in society.

There was another concern raised about restrictive thresholds for what kind of agricultural land might “count” in the inventory. In response, Ryan agreed, and said he believes that all conserved agricultural land should count equally.

There was a question about whether or not it had to be all or nothing, or if there could be a hybrid approach. Isaac shared a state map demonstrating what conserved agricultural land looks like on the ground, and responds that there may be certain ways to distinguish (forested “ag land” versus tillable ag land, for example).

After looking at the map, one member said that it brought up more questions than answers, especially around how much agricultural land is already in a permanent easement, which land is within a floodplain and may not always be in agriculture, and which land that currently exists in another land use category may be “low hanging fruit” for suitable conversion to agriculture. To summarize, there’s an interest in a more holistic view toward the charge that the legislature has given the group.

Stacy summarizes themes that the group would like to see in future meetings:

- Defining “biodiversity”
- Payment for Ecosystem Services Working Group information or presentation

The group adjourned at 1:00pm.

Next meeting: February 21st, 11am – 1pm.