

Draft Position Statements for the Agriculture Working Group to Consider

VHCB staff (Isaac Bissell and Stacy Cibula) prepared these draft statements for the group to discuss and consider at our 2/21 meeting. The purpose is to help organize our discussion and to gauge the level of group support for these statements. This could then serve as a framework from which to develop a response to our primary question from the legislature: **which conserved agricultural lands support and enhance biodiversity, therefore meeting the goals of Act 59?** These are by no means set in stone, and we view these a starting point for what we hope will be a robust conversation at the meeting. Please come ready to discuss. There will be time for the group to add additional statements to this list, and add statements about a number of cross-related questions that are outlined in Act 59, which we discuss at the meeting.

1. There can be both synergies and tensions between biodiversity conservation and agricultural productivity on lands protected by agricultural conservation easements.
2. The primary purpose of most agricultural conservation easements is to protect the agricultural use and future viability of the land subject to the easement.
3. Agricultural conservation easements are not prescriptive about agricultural practices, which allows agricultural practices to evolve and keeps the regulation of agricultural practices in the hands of state and federal policymakers.
4. Agricultural conservation easements usually allow for the conversion of forestland to agriculture.
5. The terms of agricultural easements open the door to agricultural practices and land conversion that can have negative impacts on biodiversity in certain circumstances.
6. There are major practical limitations associated with the conversion of the majority of land associated with Vermont's agricultural conservation easements to annual production models.
7. Practical limitations associated with the conversion of lands to annual agricultural production include soil type, slope, hydrology, access and land use regulations.
8. Vermont has approximately 225,000 acres protected by agricultural conservation easements. Of those acres, xx percent are considered tillable lands (estimated to be less than 50 percent).
9. Lands that are not tillable are very unlikely to ever be brought into annual agricultural production.

10. At present, lands protected by agricultural conservation easements are xx percent forestland [estimate is 30-40 percent), xx percent pasture/hayland, and xx percent in annual production (estimate is less than 40 percent). Statistics to be created using GIS analysis and presented to the agriculture working group at next working group meeting).
11. All lands that are not in annual agricultural production are likely helping to support and restore biodiversity, although the type and degree of biodiversity support and restoration will vary depending on the successional state and management regime.
12. Given the present makeup of our conserved agricultural lands, at minimum xx percent of the land is presently supporting and restoring biodiversity (estimate is greater than 50 percent). Given the practical limitations associated with the conversion of land to annual agricultural production along with the trajectory of agricultural practices and Vermont's regulatory environment, it seems nearly certain that this percentage will either remain steady or increase over time.
13. Productive agricultural lands are a critical natural resource that must be preserved and as these lands tend to be more easily developed than other types of land, they are being lost to development at a dramatic pace.
14. Maintaining productive agricultural lands is crucial for Vermont's future food security and preserving our working agricultural landscape is therefore a critical aspect of Vermont's climate resilience.
15. Conserved farmland along waterways provide critical flood storage, which is an ever-increasing need as we grapple with the effects of stronger and more frequent storms due to climate change.
16. The conservation of agricultural lands prevents those lands from being developed and provides the opportunity for the implementation of conservation practices that benefit biodiversity on these farms.
17. The majority of the acreage associated with agricultural lands supports and restores biodiversity and will continue to do so indefinitely. Those lands that are not presently supporting and restoring biodiversity are an important and highly threatened natural resource that is crucial to Vermont's future food security and climate resilience. Therefore, all land protected by agricultural conservation easements should be included towards the achievement of the conservation goals outlined in Act 59.