

Introduction: Healthy Farms, Healthy People

According to the most recent statistics from United States Department of Agriculture, farming accounts for one in every six jobs in Vermont. Vermonters have long recognized the economic and cultural significance of Vermont agriculture. But with increasing threats to Vermont farmers, including federal funding rollbacks, unstable pricing, and losses of generational knowledge, it is important to also look at the socioeconomic impacts of agriculture.

Malnutrition and food insecurity are growing problems in Vermont. According to America's Second Harvest, Vermont has the third lowest unemployment rate of all 50 states, and a similarly low poverty rate. But when food insecurity (a household's knowledge of where their next meal will come from) is factored in, Vermont's rank drops by 10 places, to number 13. Childhood obesity and malnutrition are also increasing throughout the country. This is partially because of the increasing costs of farm fresh foods such as milk, cheese, fruits and vegetables, rather than manufactured processed foods. When a single mother walks into a grocery store on a limited budget, it is almost always easier for her to "fill" the stomachs of her children by buying packaged noodles than by buying fresh produce. People living in poverty, the elderly and other vulnerable groups face similar challenges when it comes to maintaining a healthy diet.

The health of Vermont's people depends on the health of Vermont's farms. For this reason, I would like to offer the following policy platform to address the long-term health of Vermont agriculture.

Improve long-term farm security through diversification of revenue streams and improved farmer education and support groups

- 1. Encourage the development of farm-based, on-site renewable energy sources through tax breaks and other government incentives.** Vermont must begin taking drastic measures to decrease our dependence on dangerous foreign oil sources by moving toward a diverse portfolio focused on renewable energy. Byproducts from farms, such as manure, biofuels, woodchips and other biomasses are fantastic potential sources of renewable energy. Farms are also in a unique position to harness solar and wind power. Encouraging farms to develop renewable energy sources utilizes waste from farms, cuts down on fossil fuel emissions from farm-based agricultural production and provides an unparalleled opportunity for research and development of new innovations in renewable energy. Reduced energy costs and revenue not dependent on volatile milk prices will add further financial stability for farmers. This is a perfect example of where Vermont can lead in environmental technological innovations with practical applications.
- 2. Provide incentives for increased farm to school programs.** Establishing consistent channels between farms and schools will accomplish several critical ends. First, it will expand local markets for farms and provide stable contracts for produce that can be accounted for before the harvest. Farmers can negotiate either

through state mechanisms or directly with schools at the beginning of each school year for a certain amount of product to go toward school lunches. Since this will be a government contract, it can be paid in advance. Second, it will strengthen local food systems by enabling more farm products to be consumed locally. This will cut down on shipping costs, curb vehicle emissions related to moving food, and ensure that when the food is consumed it is fresher and more nutritious. Third, it will improve the nutritious value of school lunches and other school meal programs. School meals are notoriously unhealthy. This is unnecessary in a state with such a strong agricultural sector. Finally, farm to school programs don't just need to be about buying and selling. They can help students understand the importance of farms and farming by knowing where their food comes from. This will educate a new generation about the vitality of agriculture, and perhaps encourage more young people to pursue farming as a career.

- 3. Invest directly into infrastructure for processing and value added production.** Vermont farmers have increasing potential for specialty meat production and value-added agricultural products. But regulations and increased fixed costs have threatened our slaughterhouses and meat processing facilities. Furthermore, inspection regulations that have emerged have threatened some of our specialty meat products that have the potential to compete in the global marketplace. We must provide direct resources and technical assistance from the agriculture department to ensure we maintain our meat processing capability with easy access from all parts of the state. We also need to make sure that entrepreneurs have a low-risk opportunity to develop value added products that utilize Vermont crops. The agriculture incubator in Franklin County has shown us the incredible potential in this sector, but the facility needs substantial improvements and is not centrally located. We need to invest as a state to ensure this innovative part of the economy can continue to grow and create new markets for our farmers.
- 4. Continue to support and expand targeted farmer education programs.** Programs aimed at assisting specific groups of farmers, such as young farmers or women farmers, should be expanded. There are a number of fantastic agricultural education and extension programs in Vermont, and the successful models should be replicated, with state support, throughout even the most rural areas. Every farmer should have some kind of peer network. This will allow for better knowledge-sharing between farmers, provide more opportunities for education and innovation, and also address the potentially decreasing number of farmers in younger generations. We can also help dairy farmers to work together around the state and throughout the country to more effectively regulate milk supply and price, and even herd count.

Protect Farmers from Disproportionate Economic and Legal Burdens

- 1. Exempt land sold for agricultural purposes from the Vermont Land Gains Tax.** Including farm lands under the Vermont Land Gains Tax places an undue

burden on farmers who are acquiring the land for direct economic, rather than investment, purposes. Farmers utilize land to make a living rather than to hold on to while value appreciates, or to vacation. Forcing farmers to pay a special tax each time they acquire new lands provides a disincentive to the expansion of farming operations. This measure should be undertaken in conjunction with a study on the impact to the Education Fund and the General Fund. A similar study is already underway to examine changes in definitions under Act 207.

- 2. Pass the Farmer Protection Act.** Every farmer has a right to use modern technology on his or her own farm in whatever way he or she chooses, and the state should not interfere with this. The Farmer Protection Act is not meant to limit the applications of new technologies by farmers, but to protect farmers from economic damages and frivolous lawsuits from manufacturers of genetically engineered seeds. If organic or other specialty farms are contaminated by genetically engineered seeds, and suffer economic losses as a result, without the Farmer Protection Act they have no choice but to sue the farmer from whose land the seeds came. The Farmer Protection Act also ensures that Vermont farmers are protected by Vermont laws, and not vulnerable to arbitrary external lawsuits.

Work with the Congressional delegation to create a concrete and consistent Vermont farming and dairy agenda for advocacy at the federal level

The government of Vermont should work with advocacy groups and the congressional delegation in order to provide comprehensive and consistent advocacy for Vermont farmers at the federal level. **This is especially relevant as Congress begins to debate the 2007 Farm Bill.** Vermont must establish its needs early, and a **coordinated advocacy strategy must be developed, including:**

- 1. Ensuring that in the 2007 Farm Bill Conservation Title Program, proper attention is given to needs of VT farmers.** Provisions for states in the Northeast are dramatically below provisions for states in other regions. The USDA claims that this is because the region does not rely heavily on farming. Levels for Vermont should match levels of other states with similar reliance on agriculture.
- 2. Preventing decreases in federal funding for agricultural extension programs, including advocating for reinstatement of the Youth in Agriculture program.** College and university-based agricultural extension programs receive funding through the Cooperative State Research Education and Extension Service (CSREES). According to President Bush's FY 2007 budget, CSREES research and development would be cut by \$127 million, almost 20% of the total budgetary allotment.
- 3. Including a dairy price support system in the 2007 Farm Bill and establish regional pricing systems.** Current federal milk prices are well below the cost of

production for many smaller-scale dairy operations in Vermont. Giant dairy industries in the Western states continue to expand, which drives down the cost of production. As a result, milk prices don't reflect regional differences in production costs. This puts Vermont dairy farmers and producers at a significant national disadvantage.

Improve access of vulnerable groups to farm fresh foods

- 1. Expand gleanings programs to distribute excess harvest to food banks and food shelves.** The state can provide support for this in two ways. First, it can allow farmers to claim donated produce as a tax deduction based on the value of the produce. Massive quantities of food are wasted every year because it is difficult to predict at planting time what the market will be at harvest time. This allows farmers to minimize their economic loss while simultaneously providing large quantities of nutritious foods for clients of food banks and food shelves. Second, the state can create infrastructure to ease this process. Refrigerated vans circulating between different farms and food shelves within a region can move thousands of pounds of fruits and vegetables every day. Standard food shelf fare is day old bread and donated packaged candy bars and condiments from large food manufacturers. Vulnerable groups who rely on food shelves for meals deserve nutritious food. A number of successful models for this already exist in Vermont and throughout the Northeast and can be replicated on a statewide level.
- 2. Provide support for all farmers' markets, cooperatives and farm stands to accept food stamps and WIC benefits.** Recipients of federal food aid programs, such as food stamps or Women, Infants and Children benefits, should be able to use their benefits to purchase locally grown fruits, vegetables and dairy products. This provides a new market for farmers, who still get paid the same amount for their products, while simultaneously enabling vulnerable Vermonters to get better access to farm fresh foods. The state of Vermont should provide the technical assistance to allow local markets and other small sales venues to accept federal food benefits as payment for goods.