

VERMONT FOOD SYSTEM PLAN ISSUE BRIEF



ISSUE:

Agriculture and Food Policy

What's At Stake?

Public policy is generally described as a system of laws, regulatory measures, courses of action, and funding priorities concerning a given topic, promulgated by a government entity or its representatives. Existing agriculture and food policy in Vermont seeks to strike a balance between farm viability, maintaining the working landscape, and protecting environmental and public health. It is critical that Vermont's food and agriculture policies continually evolve to best support food and farming systems that benefit the public at large, while allowing Vermont agricultural and food producers to live healthy lives, produce high-quality food, and operate thriving businesses in their communities.

Current Conditions

Agriculture and food policies govern a wide range of issues, opportunities, and conflicts. These include public health and private land use considerations, and myriad environmental concerns such as decreasing erosion and preserving water quality, reducing the use of harmful chemicals in agricultural systems, and improving agricultural practices to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. Policy can also foster transparency in supply chains, promote equitable food access, impact subsidy allocations and food labeling, and resolve labor and trade disputes.

The federal farm bill governs policies and programs related to farming, food and nutrition, and rural communities. Over the past several decades federal policy has led to massive consolidation within agricultural

industries, loss of farmland, and the hollowing out of rural communities in Vermont and across the country. During the same period, the public's interest in food and agriculture policy has risen as the organic and local food movements have successfully shifted public preferences in favor of local food production, transparency, and quality over convenience, quantity, and shelf life.

While Vermont producers' values have been in general alignment with these public preferences for decades, Vermont state agencies are challenged to apply federal policies, designed to address large-scale industrialized agriculture models, to the scale and diversity of Vermont's producers.



Bottlenecks & Gaps

- The state does not have a clearly articulated set of values and goals guiding its policy decisions around food and agriculture.
- Despite strong local and state public participation requirements for development of food and agricultural regulations, most citizens, including farmers, have limited time for, ability to, and/or interest in giving input.
- Consolidation within agriculture, and corporate lobbying efforts, often lead the federal government to prioritize large agricultural interests over small producers and family farms.
- Agriculture is often perceived through examples of its bad actors, instead of through its innovative successes and integral role in solving climate change and other environmental issues.
- State policy initiatives have not ensured that farm families are supported with basic life needs such as health care and child care, an issue highlighted when the COVID-19 pandemic added pressure on farmers to maintain a stable local food supply.

Opportunities

- Many Vermont producers support practical and innovative approaches that secure public goods like clean water, healthy soil, thriving communities, and healthy people.
- Vermont's strong state-level governmental and legislative bodies emphasize public participation in food and agriculture policies.
- Use Value Appraisal (aka Current Use), scale-stratified regulations built into Required Agricultural Practices (RAPs), Act 250, and other state policies are a solid foundation for a comprehensive policy framework.
- Vermont's agricultural businesses have demonstrated the ability to utilize new technologies and methods, creating co-benefits that improve food production, health, environmental sustainability, and climate mitigation/adaptation.
- Vermont's small population base and participatory government culture allow both private and public-sector perspectives to form the foundation of policy initiatives.

Recommendations

- It is important for policy makers and others to prioritize farmers' mental health via programs and educational events. Trade wars, climate change, depressed commodity prices, and labor issues, all beyond Vermont farmers' control, impact farm viability and hence farmers' physical and mental health. (see [Health Care brief](#))
- Provide at least \$1.5 million in funding annually to the Working Lands Enterprise Fund, which provides strategic grant funds to strengthen innovative farms and food businesses.
- Fund Vermont Housing and Conservation Board's Farm & Forest Viability Program annually with \$3 million from the Property Transfer Tax Fund, in order to expand its capacity to provide critical business and technical assistance services to farms and forest products businesses of all types across Vermont.
- Invest in the development and implementation of innovative mechanisms, such as payment for ecosystem services, which strike a balance between public benefit and farm viability (see [Payment for Ecosystem Services brief](#)).
- Develop policies that support adaptation to new business models, with triple-bottom-line benefits, and incentivize innovation, value-added production, and infrastructure support for Vermont's agricultural community.
- The Vermont Agency of Agriculture, Food and Markets, in partnership with agriculture and food policy stakeholders, should build a comprehensive and fully aligned state-level agricultural policy road map. This could include an annual review of existing and proposed new policy objectives before each state legislative session to ensure policy decisions compliment each other, and to balance reactive and proactive programs. Such a roadmap could also allow for more public participation at multiple points throughout the policy development process.

Farm to Plate is Vermont's food system plan being implemented statewide to increase economic development and jobs in the farm and food sector and improve access to healthy local food for all Vermonters.

The Vermont Agency of Agriculture, Food & Markets (VAAFAM) facilitates, supports, and encourages the growth and viability of agriculture in Vermont while protecting the working landscape, human health, animal health, plant health, consumers, and the environment.

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