Testimony to the House Agriculture, Food Resilience & Forestry Committee from a small farmer on the VCSI Ag Lands Working Group

4/10/24

The Community Resilience and Biodiversity Bill (Act 59 or 30 x 30) was born out of the recognition that humanity faces a moment of existential peril, but, as it's champion, Representative Amy Sheldon (D-Middlebury)----Chair of Natural Resources, Fish and Wildlife Committee---has said: "this bill is focused on getting the definition of conservation correct from the start and then creating a plan for how we can meet the goals." By presenting us with an opportunity to assess our current standards of conservation and then charting a path forward, Act 59 has the potential to become a transformative policy tool. Conservation interweaves a broad inter-sectionality of related issues, including; affordable housing, access to land, farm viability, rights of nature, climate mitigation and climate refugee resettlement---to name just several. As the parameters of the act are established through the findings and recommendations of the working groups, it is critical that the public is informed and empowered to participate and engage in the roll-out.

The initiative for 30 x 30 comes from the recognition that we are losing forest to development and losing connectivity to fragmentation just at a time when much of our forest cover is returning to old forest status. Vermont's woodlands are part of a vast system in the northeast comprising 26 million acres of mixed hardwood & boreal forests. This northern forest system is already mitigating climate change through carbon sequestration and ecosystem services and is a crucial reservoir of biodiversity---but these benefits will be lost if these forests continue to be developed or managed unsustainably. In terms of immediate impact in the midst of the climate crisis & loss of biodiversity, *the most consequential action we can can take in the northeast is to protect our mature forests.*

I fully support the aims of Act 59 in this regard. I also would like to see all classes of land be holistically included in its aims and goals. I hope that we can see at least 10% of our forests placed into ecological reserve status and would like to see more. For those lands that are in the category of natural resource lands protected from conversion, we need to ensure that"working lands"----both forest and farm---are included in this category, and that all lands that fall within 30x30 receive renewed incentives to establish production practices that equally value sustaining and restoring soil health, landscape function and biodiversity, even when they are managed under a "production" regime. If we consider that the average conserved farm in Vermont is 50% forested and includes meadows, wetlands, ponds and streams, we must conclude that the exclusion of Ag lands from the Act 59 inventory would actually diminish biodiversity protection in the state.

In regards to the phase one task of creating an inventory of conserved lands eligible for inclusion in 30x30, I feel the Vermont Conservation Strategic initiative Ag Land Working Group (VCSI-ALWG) draft recommendation accurately reflects the consensus of the working group in asserting that *all current and future conserved Ag lands should count within the 30 x 30 inventory.* That the factor of carbon markets isn't addressed in the ALWG draft document is attributable to a poll the co-chairs held at the 2nd to last ALWG meeting where only Caroline Gordon of Rural-VT, Jennifer Byrne of the WRJ-NRCD, and myself representing the Vermont Healthy Soils Coalition (VHSC) voted for the inclusion of a stated position rejecting carbon markets (or even further discussion of the topic in phase one). My

impression is that the majority of members on the ALWG wanted to focus solely on the mandate to establish the parameters of inventory and chose to punt the carbon markets issue to the 2nd phase; which will take on specific recommendations for implementation of Act 59.

Looking ahead to phase two: what existing policies or new policies might we have the opportunity to design and implement to help Ag & forest land managers achieve the aims of Act 59?

Climate instability is already displacing people. By 2050 we can expect a surge of migration to the Northeast. There is an urgent need to conserve all working lands now. The ALWG draft report uses data to substantiate justified anxiety that unconserved Ag lands will soon be devoured by development if a mechanism (like state-wide and use planning) is not created to protect them. The New England Feeding New England (NEFNE) Vermont State brief presented to the legislature this year predicts that food scarcity will become a real issue in the not-too-distant future. The mandate to create a conservation inventory and road map to the 30 x 30 goal could be facilitated by the development of a State-wide Land Use Plan. Holistic strategic planning will be essential to the re-localization of our food economy and energy systems necessary for our region to survive and thrive despite all the disruptions predicted to affect global supply chains. In the best of worlds, we will align the goals of 30 x 30 conservation with the stated goal of the report from NEFNE to have Vermont farmers produce 30% of the food consumed in the state by 2030. The best way to ensure that conserved land is also restored land is to grant incentives and price supports to land managers who adopt healthy soil practices so that they and their employees can earn a Vermont living wage (currently estimated at about $24.00/hr). This is the crux of ecological and economic justice.

The NEFNE posits that we need an additional half a million acres of Ag land for New England to achieve food security. What happens if we don't assume a business-as-usual approach to Ag land management? What happens if the Ag acres in New England are managed in a way that makes them wildly more productive while at the same time enhances their landscape function and restores biodiversity?

Imagine if the 93,000 prime agricultural acres currently devoted to growing corn silage in VT for cow feed to produce commodity milk were transitioned to an organic-regenerative model that introduces agroforestry practices, including: Alley cropping fruit & nut trees with under-stories of fruiting shrubs and medicinal plants, windbreaks and riparian zones that include fruit & nut trees. Crop rotations of annuals, including the re-introduction of grains and legumes grown in no-till and reduced tillage systems. Integration of livestock through grazing of crop residues and cover crops. Application of compost and mulches to maintain and restore fertility. The agroecological model is labor intensive, which means increased opportunity for meaningful employment in the Ag sector. In this scenario: *It's not a matter of getting rid of cows---it's about bringing back in everything else!*

The 240,000 acres or so of forage and hill pastures could likewise be converted into silvopasture systems with multiple benefits that accrue from ruminant grazing, including healthier-better-protected soil and increased water infiltration. Windbreaks and shelterbelts can be planted to tree species that can be coppiced as a livestock forage supplement and for building materials and fuel. To increase agricultural production we can introduce livestock grazing and cropping systems into young scrub forests without all the ecological destruction of leveling and plowing them down----mimicking natural ecosystems and echoing the management strategies of indigenous people.

These farms of the future can become net energy producers through renewables such as wind and agri-voltaics, appropriate-scale fish-friendly hydro, and sustainably grown biofuels. Beyond its value as a medicinal, hemp can be grown for food, paper, fiber and building materials.

Can we build a new ecological economy framed by the goals of re-localization of our food and energy systems? If we recognize that we are in a climate and biodiversity emergency and start this transition now---we may just have time enough to create local solutions that can provide future human communities with what they need to live good lives while repairing our broken relationship to this land and its original inhabitants.

The UN convention has documented that land under indigenous peoples' management retains 2/3rds of the world's biodiversity---even though in many cases it is "working land". Act 59 presents us with an opportunity to redress past wrongs by ceding back a TBD portion of public lands to be placed under the management of the four recognized bands of the Abenaki and ensuring access to their sacred sites.

Currently, 75% of Vermont's forest is in family ownership. 98% of timber harvested in state is from these private lands. Vermont already has 27% of it's land protected under conservation. We can meet the 30 x 30 goal by setting all the public land within the state and national forests into the status of Ecological Reserve. In our working forests we can sustain a planned local harvest while managing for biodiversity by creating a certified Ecological Forest Management program for foresters---and making it a requirement for enrollment in Current Use (UVA). This could help jump start a "localvore" movement in the wood products industries.

Passive management of woodlands should be an option for all enrollees in UVA. We can also offer landowners a 2nd tier of UVA enrollment by creating additional tax abatement for permanent conservation---thereby providing an annual benefit in addition to a one time payment for the sale of development rights. A third tier of tax abatement could be offered to landowners with under-utilized Ag land who enter into a conservation easement that includes granting access to farmland to new farmers and those who have been historically disenfranchised.

We should place a moratorium on false solutions such as burning biomass for electricity or biofuel for heating. Neither should conserved acreage be enrolled in carbon credit trading schemes so that polluting industries can go on polluting. At our farm in Hartland we choose to focus on restoration of the carbon cycle---not just on sequestration. Investment in incentives for land managers to adopt healthy soil practices has proven to be *the most cost-effective way to sequester carbon.*

Last year the legislature passed the HOME Act – which is designed to address Vermont's chronic housing shortage by allowing denser building of compact affordable housing within our existing villages and towns. If we are to halt forest and farm land conversion, it will be critical to link our conservation goals with progressive zoning.

In phase one, the VCSI-ALWG agreed in consensus that *all current and future conserved Ag land should be included in a 30 x 30 inventory*---I think that's a win for land and people because it will give policy makers more leverage to promote agroecological principles and practices. The conservation of working farm & forest land may be our last best chance to ensure the continuance of a vibrant rural economy and to pass on a livable planet to the next generation. Vermont should adopt 30 x 30 goals free of the long shadow of enclosure, free of the taint of carbon trading---and become a society that increases equity in access to sustainable working lands---so that even in the midst of the climate and ecological crisis we can mitigate and adapt and create a more just and ecologically viable human pathway.

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