

Testimony by Mary Berlejung before
House and Senate Agriculture Committees
January 8, 2014

My name is Mary Berlejung. I live in Groton and I managed a farmers' market there from 2007 to 2013. Since moving here from Northern Virginia in 2006 I have been fortunate to have access to locally raised meat, which I buy exclusively, and to raise much of my own produce plus what I buy at the farmers' market. I have a Masters degree in nutrition and worked as a dietitian in medical facilities until my move to Vermont. So food and nutrition have always been my business.

I am not representing the farmers' market today, I merely want to express my own concerns about the future of the small diversified farm in Vermont. I attended a few meetings of this committee in the past two years as well as open meetings of the WLEB, and so have great admiration for all your hard work and talent ,but I believe that the problems you face are of crisis proportions, and I see a need to step up the effort. They say that life is what happens while you are making plans and a lot of history is happening now while we set long-range goals.

There is a question of Vermont's commitment to meeting major challenges such as climate change. When Bill McKibben addressed the legislature last summer I was disappointed to see so many empty seats. The highschoolers who were attending streamed into those empty chairs. And the questions from the few legislators who were there were generally hostile. I don't know what other commitments kept so many of our legislators away, but

it seemed to show a lack of interest in looking at the major crisis of our times.

I grew up in Brooklyn where, throughout the 50s and 60s I saw most of Long Island's farms converted to bedroom communities. In Northern Virginia from the 70s through 2006 I saw the farmland of Fairfax County outside of Washington DC disappear to housing development. Now the only farms in that county are museum farms.

Things are changing here, too, and at an accelerating pace. A nearby dairy farm, with beautiful views and where the cows still eat grass, has been on the market for over 7 years, and I fear that it might eventually be sold for development. It is the luxury home market that has been showing the most rapid growth—an 18,000 square foot house in Stowe recently sold for \$9.9 million. It is no wonder that the Stowe farmers market has had a hard time finding someone to sell produce. Farmland is growing more expensive every day.

We will need the farmland in Vermont for growing food as the western farms lose productivity from drought and destruction of soil. Vermont still imports over 90 percent of its food, some of it from China, where it is reported that an area the size of Maryland has officially been declared unfit for growing crops because of soil contamination. In these times long-term goals for food self-sufficiency are not realistic. You need the political will to address our loss of farmland as a crisis.

Recent United Nations reports have stated that the solution to feeding the world is through the small diversified farm, not with intensive, high cost industrial agriculture. We should look at these reports.

All the forces that have been closing farms for the past 40 years are still at work:

Among them is poor access to loans for farm improvements and expansion. When the Working Landscape initiative was passed the request was for \$3 million per year, and ultimately \$15 million per year in matching grants to help the farming sector. Yet the first year grant was for little over \$1 million, leaving almost 90 percent of applications unfunded. This year the pot is only slightly bigger. But while we are rummaging through the sofa cushions for WLEB funds there is money in the budget to fund this program.

Another threat to the small farmer is the Food Safety Modernization Act. Was it designed to put small farmers out of business. The big agricultural lobbyists have a reputation for seeing that legislation is written favoring gigantic farms. The obvious question is; what is the risk of farm products sold within a limited geographic area compared to the from the enormous output of factory farms shipped all across the country. Is some of this concern misplaced? As a side note, one out of 20 patients admitted to the hospital acquire an infection in the hospital resulting in more than 90,000 deaths annually, by current estimates.

The small farmers want to be sure that the Agency of Agriculture is going to bat for them against onerous federal regulations. But Vermont's dependence on so much federal money and the ever present big agricultural lobbyists in these halls make them uncertain about that commitment. Secretary Ross's last words to the farmers at the recent Working Lands summit were, "Get ready, the feds are coming." That rankles me.

Before I finish I want to say how much I appreciate the efforts of the many agencies working for our farms and I applaud the successes they have had so far. My point is that the danger to our farms and our Vermont way of life is so great that it will take an enormous amount of political will to rescue us.

You have a tough job to do and I would like you to have widespread support. So many Vermonters are working long hours just to get by that they have little thought for the big issues. It will take much public education and strong leadership to make them aware of what needs to be done.

So that's the way I see things. There's so much I don't know about these issues. I hope to learn more, so I'll continue to attend your meetings.

Thank you for giving me this time to talk about my concerns.