

## Karen Freudenberger Testimony before the House Committee on Agriculture and Forest Products

Good Afternoon. I am Karen Freudenberger, representing the Vermont Goat Collaborative at Pine Island Farm in Colchester. I am here to let you know that small grants can make a very big difference. With our Working Lands funds, we built the custom slaughter facility that is key to the overall success of our farming venture.

The Vermont Goat Collaborative is a community based project that supports New American farmers to raise goat meat in the greater Burlington area. (In this context New Americans refers to newly arrived refugees.) This project grew out of discussions with the refugee community about their frustration at not being able to find affordable locally produced goat meat. Further inquiries revealed that the equivalent of some 3,000 goats is being imported frozen from Australia every year to meet the immigrant demand in greater Burlington. For Vermont, concerned about maintaining a working landscape, this represented both a travesty and an opportunity.

Last year, after extensive feasibility research, the Vermont Goat Collaborative was able to access land in Colchester through the Vermont Land Trust and started a pilot operation with Chuda Dhaurali as the lead farmer. Chuda's family was expelled from Bhutan in an ethnic cleansing in 1990. His family spent 19 years in a crowded refugee camp in Nepal before being relocated to Burlington in December 2009. For the next three years, as he assiduously worked his way up from dishwasher to assistant cook at a Burlington restaurant, he dreamed of being able to farm again.

The primary goal of the Goat Collaborative is to produce fresh, local goat meat that is affordable to the New American community and meets both their taste preferences and cultural needs. These include in many cases the ritual slaughter of an animal for religious ceremonies and community celebrations. To address the affordability issue we focused on reducing the cost of raising and slaughtering the animals. One way to reduce costs is to use, wherever possible, the by-products of existing Vermont farms. One of those "waste" products turns out to be baby boy goats from goat dairy operations. In a win-win arrangement, the farmers in the Collaborative collect these goats and then raise them to eating size on our Colchester pastures. Next we looked at slaughter. USDA approved facilities typically charge \$35 or more just to slaughter the animal and would also involve significant time and expense to get to the slaughter house. Instead, we resolved to build a custom facility at the farm. With this facility, consumers living in greater Burlington could buy a goat at Pine Island Farm, slaughter it themselves at a state approved facility in accordance with their own cultural traditions, and return home to prepare their meal...all within a five mile radius. When we say local, we mean Local.

Our Working Lands Grant of \$10,868 allowed us to refit an old milk house as a custom slaughter room. Built by volunteer labor from the community over many weekends last summer, the slaughter room completes our farm to table objective and gives the whole project coherence. In a word, NONE of what we have accomplished in the past year would have been possible without the slaughter room.

If we look at our pilot year in numbers:

We collected goat bucklings from three goat dairy farms last year (Fat Toad, Boston Post, and Blue Ledge) and expect to partner with at least two additional farms this year. Having a reliable, humane, and efficient way of disposing of bucklings has relieved a significant burden from these farms.

Chuda, who owns and manages his goat herd, grossed \$20,000 in sales, which will allow him to be fully self-sufficient this coming year and pay for feed and other inputs as needed to keep his operation going.

This past fall more than 100 families from a dozen different nationalities came to buy and custom slaughter 117 goats at the farm. As one Bhutanese grandma told us when she came to participate in the harvest: "This is so much more than meat...this is passing traditions down to our grandchildren."

We will be bringing on an additional farm family next month when a Rwandan family receives its first goats. We anticipate that a third family will join in 2015, with production reaching about 300-360 goats once we go to scale. This should represent about \$70,000 of annual revenue to Vermont that would have previously been exported out-of-state or to Australia.

Numbers are important and we think that these figures will help you understand the very real and palpable impact that an \$11,000 grant can have. But for the people we are working with, the impact is so much greater than what numbers can capture. Nearly all these refugee families were deeply connected to their own working landscapes...in Bhutan, Burma, Somalia, Congo, Rwanda... before their lives were brutally disrupted. Arriving in Vermont most are settled in dense urban neighborhoods, grateful to have jobs but working long hours sorting recycling or cleaning hotel rooms. For many, rural Vermont was as far away from downtown Winooski or Burlington's Old North End as the verdant forests of northern Burma or the lush hillsides of southern Bhutan. This sentiment was captured by a young Congolese man who found his way to the farm on a warm July day as the clouds hovered over Mount Mansfield in the distance. "You know," he said, "ever since I came to this country people have been telling me how beautiful Vermont is. But I never saw it. Today I finally understand what they are talking about."

We are grateful to the Working Lands Enterprise Fund for financing the Pine Island Community Slaughter Room that is bringing fresh goat meat to people's tables, allowing people to maintain their cultural traditions, and helping New Americans re-connect to the land as they make Vermont home. We sincerely hope that you will continue and expand this innovative program going forward.

Thank you.