

Agency of Ag Releases Second Draft of Required Agricultural Practices for Public Review

Today, the Vermont Agency of Agriculture, Food and Markets (VAAFAM) has released a second draft of the Required Agricultural Practices (RAPs) for public review. This draft, to be presented to the legislature and the public over the coming weeks, has been substantially revised to incorporate public input. The second draft is available today on the Agency website: <http://agriculture.vermont.gov/water-quality/regulations/rap>

As a result of Act 64—the Vermont Clean Water Act—signed into law in June 2015, the Agency of Agriculture was tasked with updating the Accepted Agricultural Practices (AAPs) to further reduce the impact of agriculture on water quality across the state. The RAPs are an updated version of the AAPs, the rules which regulate farms in order to protect water quality, re-written to a higher level of performance. The Agency sought public input on its first draft of the new regulations, to ensure the RAPs reflected the realities of farming and the legislative intent of Act 64.

The public meetings and public comment period held in 2015 are not required by law, however this informal process was conducted by the VAAFAM to ensure rule development which will provide a realistic, workable framework for agricultural management in our state that effectively protects Vermont's lakes and rivers. The first draft public comment period opened on October 20, 2015, and ended on December 18, 2015. During this period, 10 public meetings were held throughout Vermont – the first on November 12, 2015, at the St. Albans Historical Society and the last on December 10, 2016, at the Chandler Music Hall in Randolph. Twenty-one small focus group meetings were also held throughout the state with various stakeholders. Since the close of the first public comment period, the Agency has spent nine weeks to thoroughly review and consider all public comment—over 800 people attended more than 30 meetings throughout the state to voice their opinions and 169 Vermonters submitted written comments.

“VAAFAM wishes to thank all members of the community who took the time to provide comments or otherwise participate in this public process,” said Vermont's Ag Secretary, Chuck Ross. “This is a clear indication that Vermonters, particularly farmers, care very deeply about water quality and getting this right. When the RAPs are eventually finalized, I know they will be stronger and more effective, as a result of all the input we received.”

Act 64 specifies that the RAP rules will be finalized before July 1, 2016. In March, the Agency intends to begin formal rulemaking to meet this deadline. The public will again have the opportunity to attend public hearings and provide written comment on the RAPs during the formal public hearing and comment period, tentatively scheduled to begin in May. VAAFAM will continue to encourage public feedback and engage with stakeholders throughout the late winter prior to the formal comment period.

Jim Leland, Director of the Ag Resource Management Division at VAAFM explains, “Significant changes have been made throughout the second draft of the RAPs. We began by revising and reformatting the RAPs, in an effort to provide clarity.” Leland continues, “In addition, three areas which received the most extensive public comment and have been revised from the first draft include: the small farm certification threshold, proposed standards around manure stacking sites, and proposed manure spreading restrictions on steep slopes and high phosphorus fields.” Leland continues, “Be sure to read the responsiveness summary we’ve provided which highlights 30 major changes in the second draft of the RAPs which resulted from public input.”

The Agency’s response to comment, as well as a summary of written public comments received before Jan 1, 2016, are both available on the Agency RAP website.

For more information about the RAPs, and the Agency’s efforts to implement Act 64, please visit <http://agriculture.vermont.gov/water-quality/regulations/rap> or contact the Vermont Agency of Agriculture, Food and Markets at (802) 828-3478.

Questions and comment about the RAPs can be directed to AGR.RAP@Vermont.gov

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About the Vermont Agency of Agriculture, Food & Markets: VAAFM 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. www.Agriculture.Vermont.Gov