



## Testimony on HB 663, On-Farm Accessory Businesses - January 25, 2018

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### Who we are/Scope of our Business

Green Mountain Girls Farm, opened in 2009

#### *Food Production (65-75% of our gross income)*

- We are a diverse farm, both in the agricultural products we raise and with a strong agritourism element.
- We pasture-raised poultry, pork and historically goats, as well as about an acre of vegetables and another 1-2 acres of fruit, nuts, and herbs. Our focus is on soil health, healthy plants and livestock, regenerative farming.
- We process a good amount of food for both winter sales and as value added options - such as canned goods, frozen vegetables, soups, bone broth, pate, pestos, etc. from the food that we raise on farm
- We have both farmshare members and a retail on-site farmstand that is open everyday, year-round.
- Our sales are predominantly direct from our farmstand, though we do participate in a few farmers markets, but they are more of a community engagement and support exercise as income from these is small.

#### *Agri-Tourism (25-35% of our gross income)*

We offer people the opportunity to experience a bit of farm life through lodging, events and paid farm experiences, such as farm tours, Lattes on the Hoof, collecting eggs, greeting baby chicks, canning, etc. Overall, we are practicing relational farming, inviting members and visitors to share and enjoy our farm and its products.

We are a small farm, with approximately \$150,000 per year in sales. Our customer base is small but deep, in that we sell a lot of food and farm experiences to a smaller number of overall people

### Our Vision: why we designed to have "accessory" business in first place

We didn't consider Agritourism an "accessory" when we were designing our business. It fit our approach, interests, market & financial realities.

- Agritourism was integral in helping people understand and care about local, sustainably raised food
- We saw a future where Vermont persists as a global geotourism leader, and as a place where farms could succeed by working with natural cycles, providing healthy food and creating stronger communities; and that a package of micro enterprises could produce an alchemy which enriches our community; generates

adequate income and resources to sustain us and our staff; and work with natural systems, restoring where possible.

- We had a sharing/tourism mindset and eco-tourism background
- Our business plan projections showed that food sales alone wouldn't be sustainable -- that has proven to be overwhelmingly true -- margins on local food, especially sustainably raised food that is not externalizing costs and impacts to our water, land, health, etc is slim to none. Shockingly the more you talk details with VT farmers, even the "successful" ones, few are able to pay themselves a living wage or any wage at all.
  - At the Agri-tourism conference in Rutland a few years ago, with great empathy, Congressman Peter Welch thanked the audience for all they do to keep Vermont farms alive, specifically referencing that most folks have off-farm jobs to enable their families to keep their farms open. - But to what other business sector would one even feel comfortable saying that -- plumbers, electricians, engineers, state workers, -- thank you for getting another job so you can subsidize electrical work for your community?
  - Sad reality is it is extremely hard to make food production alone a viable business.

## **The Range of "accessory" activities we have pursued over past 9 years**

- Farm tours
- Farm dinners & events
- Workshops & classes - cheesemaking, sausage-making, cooking classes
- Custom farm experiences - Lattes on the Hoof, etc
- Farmstays - Overnight guests
- Event space rental for meetings & parties, often with a meal made from our farm's food
- Williams college winter study - intensive week of on-farm lodging & education;
- And Value added food processing - including creating a space with a retail cutting license so we can make soups, stocks, sausage & cut our own meat. Which we don't consider Ag-tourism, but seems to show up on the "accessory" list you are considering.

## **Why we embarked on some of these**

*(some are still in our portfolio, some less so, future uncertain on many)*

- Marketing for the food we raise - ways to meet new customers, get people to our farm
- Additional income and reaching an additional market - tourists and travelers;
- To Fill in year round calendar - income in the quieter winter months
- Value added products to diversify and increase sales and
- to address the challenge and cost of meat processing facilities

Overall we have tried to scale our "accessory businesses" to fit with our property and our business. Challenge continues to be what gets priority. Ideally, there is the alchemy where there various enterprises support each other make us viable. Some folks pay to see the food growing, others to learn how it grows and other yet pay to eat it. Best of all is when the same customer does all 3.

## **Where we have engaged with our town(s) & neighbors**

- Our setting: our Farm crosses two towns & two counties, at top of watershed
- Rural residential zoning -- several other working lands and other businesses on our road -- 2 sugar houses, large game weigh station & taxidermy operation; daycare; another guesthouse; firewood operation
- Property has a conservation easement on it, held by Vermont Land Trust, that was in place before we purchased the property

### **Town(s)**

- hardly any official engagement, perhaps there should have been more...
- We have gotten soft recognition from our town officials that we help bring people to Northfield for our Farmstays that might not be coming to Northfield otherwise.
- We have checked in with zoning administrator to provide updated farm plan for their records after building our last barn, though some of our Ag buildings were in other towns
- Some questions/frustrations on property tax assessment specifically due to our farmstay component. Our main barn which is primarily used for our Ag production (winter livestock housing; hay storage; farmstand; seed starting; veg wash/pack station; and walk-in fridge/freezer) is not treated as a full Ag building because about 30% by square footage is used for overnight guests, events, workshops and space rental. (though I think the bed space is the critical piece that pulled it out of Ag treatment for tax purposes) -- That also means that an additional 2 acres of land around that barn is pulled out of current use exemption in addition to 2 acres around our house which for our small farm means that almost all of our land we use for Ag in Northfield is taxed at residential rate, not current use.

### **Vermont Land Trust**

We've had more engagement with Vermont Land Trust than with our towns about the tourism aspects of our farm business. In the early years, it actually took several conversations to have them fully on board and "approving" our agri-tourism elements, which is somewhat required by the terms of our easement. But they have been supportive.

### **Neighbors**

- We have good relations with our neighbors, which we have worked on intentionally - most of whom are happy that we are keeping land open and active
- We've had one neighborhood complaint about parking on the road for a past event. -- We always have discouraged parking on the road for safety reasons but people's parking instincts are not strong. we now post No parking on Road signs for all events.
- We took that seriously as neighbors thriving is part of our complex bottom line and because we know that in any grey areas around what is and is not allowed, neighbors objections matter a lot. And we know that in other towns folks have faced much more scrutiny and challenges in expanding their farm business.

We may not have experienced problems (from officials) in running a diverse Ag & agritourism business, but there is a lot of uncertainty in so many areas about what is and is not allowable as a "farm business". A bill like this may make it clearer for all and especially help farms in communities that are seeking to constrain on-farm activities.