

## CVFC Talking Point: House/Senate Ag Committees 2-10-2017

### BACKGROUND

- Champlain Valley Farmer Coalition is a non-profit farmer organization dedicated to protecting water quality in Lake Champlain and a thriving agricultural economy in Vermont. We strive to be a unified voice that represents a diversity of farms and farming practices. While we don't agree on everything, we do agree that our mission of water quality and sustainable farms is a priority for Vermont.
- We educate our members, the public and policy makers about farming practices that protect water quality and soil health.
  - CVFC was recently awarded the 2016 National No-Till Innovator Award for organizations for our work promoting and adopting soil health practices like reduced tillage and cover cropping.
- Started in 2013 with a founding membership of 12, we currently have
  - 87 members, with
  - 63 farm-members representing 32 Small Farms, 23 Medium Farms, and 8 Large Farms.
  - Our members represent all types of agriculture including dairy, beef, vegetable, and small grains/cash crops.
  - 12% of our farmer members are organic (higher than the percentage of organic farms statewide).
  - Member farms operate over 47,000 acres of corn, soybeans, vegetables, hay and pasture in the Lake Champlain watershed.
  - We also have 17 members that are agricultural business or farm related non-profit organizations in addition to our UVM Extension members and support staff. In addition, we fund two part-time coordinators to accomplish our work.
- Close partnership with UVM Extension's Middlebury agronomy team.
- Funded through grants and membership fees.
- CVFC played an active role engaging its members in the formulation of the RAPs in hopes of helping the agency create standards that protect water quality, but are practical to implement on Vermont farms. We want the RAPs to be work for water quality and be workable for farmers.
- We support the agency of agriculture and want to work with them to accomplish the goals of Act 64.

### FUNDING

- Clean water funding is a statewide investment. We want to see a solid return on that investment. That will entail targeted funding where we get the most bang for our buck.

- To accomplish the goals of Act 64 it is imperative that we are able to secure a stable, long-term funding strategy for Vermont.
- The funding source selected should not be overly burdensome to collect, practically or financially.
- Currently MFO/LFO fees go to funding VAAF staff. We would like to see that funding go towards ag clean water project implementation and pay for agency staff from the general fund.
- While we support funding coming from the agriculture sector to address ag water quality efforts, we don't want to see farmers get hit with multiple fees. \$2500/\$1500 permit fees are already significant; more fees on top of that could be burdensome. We realize that farms will get tapped with any kind of property tax or stormwater fee, but want policy makers to be aware that farms may end up paying in multiple ways.
- Funding that supports and compliments efforts by UVM Extension, NRCS, Conservation Districts and other partners will also be key.

#### **OTHER POINTS**

- Farmers of all types are engaged in positive change right now. We are adapting our farming practices, identifying methods and technology to implement best management practices that are improving soil health, reducing runoff and benefiting our bottom line.
  - In the last 3-5 years, Vermont farmers have increased their use of cover cropping from hundreds of acres annually to almost 30,000 acres this year. That represents roughly 30% of all the annual cropland in the state.
  - Our members planted over 9,000 acres and no-tilled 25% of their annual cropland in 2016. The impact for Vermont is in the range of 10,000 tons of topsoil saved from loss by erosion, keeping 22 tons of Phosphorus out of the lake to improve water quality, increasing cover crop seed sales income for agribusiness by nearly \$364,000 and starting a new opportunity for local cover crop seed production by member farms
  - We rely on science to help us accomplish this change. Many of our members are active partners in research and demonstration projects to evaluate these practices on real farms and in our challenging Vermont climate and soils.
- Regenerative farming is not unique to a small group of Vermonters. In fact, the tenants of regenerative agriculture are long-term goals for all of us. Increasing soil health, building organic matter, sequestering carbon, reducing erosion and runoff, maintaining resilient farming systems and ecosystems is achievable, but only if it includes all kinds of strategies to achieve it. It will also require that all farms work together in order to accomplish that goal. We must not pit ourselves against each other, but instead learn from each other to 'up our game' and adopt strategies that work for the long-term.

That will take all of us. Agriculture in Vermont is not a battleground, but instead a diverse and innovative place moving forwards to improve our sustainability on all levels.

- We rely on partners like UVM Extension and NRCS who have shared goals for increasing soil health and protecting water quality.
- Our organization has been and can continue to be a resource for our member farms and to the legislature and state agencies as we strive to manage this complex and difficult challenge before us. PLEASE utilize that resource. We will be inviting you to join us at meetings and on our farms, feel free to call on us when you have questions or need input.

#### **ADDITIONAL TOPICS THAT MAY COME UP**

- **Tile Drainage.** It is important to allow for proper investigation of not only potential environmental ramifications of this tool, but also to evaluate management practices that might offset those potential problems. While a practice that is in limited use, it has a very valuable role to play in helping farms be resilient in the face of more extreme weather events (both wet and dry). This is especially true on the challenging soils in the Champlain Valley. Some farms have a substantial investment in this infrastructure, and it has allowed them to adopt conservation practices that are improving water quality and soil health. Like all other practices in farming, it will require careful and thoughtful management, based on the best available science.
- **Floodplains.** This is an area of the RAPs that will likely require some flexibility at the farm and field level. Protecting these vulnerable areas is important, but in some cases the rules as written could be overly restrictive and not necessarily accomplish the goals of Act 64. Many of our members are looking to continue this discussion with you and the Agency.
- **Atrazine.** Testimony from members Thursday (Brad Lawes, Jonathan Chamberlin). Strongly urge all of us to utilize the 30 years of data available from VAAFM on monitoring for Atrazine in wells as well as pesticide use data. We are committed to responsible use of pesticides and utilizing IPM practices. Our members report significant decreases in the use of this product. While many farmers may still use atrazine as a part of their pesticide program, the rate per acre has decreased considerably. This and many other residual herbicides are not complimentary with farmers cover cropping practices and so are being used in lower quantities or substituted with other, shorter residual products.