

Testimony from Kate Bowen
March 21, 2018
House Agriculture and Forestry Committee

I'm Kate Bowen from Meadowdale Farm in Putney. We produce meat, eggs, hay, sap, and forest products using regenerative agricultural practices. Because we aren't able to afford much land in Windham County the haying and forest products that we harvest involve using other people's land. This creates a lot of abutting neighbors that need to continuously be educated, informed, and like to be involved in what a Working Landscape looks, smells, and sounds like.

The shifting seasons dictate our days. When the ground is solidly frozen the boys go cut trees and skid them back to the landing. We sell some nice logs to large mills, saw some logs with our own mill, and the rest of the lower grade hardwood logs I process into firewood.

Farming is a life that is thought of as bucolic and simple, but in today's world it's increasingly burdensome for most of us with high financial losses, regulation, and a culture who doesn't accept you. They welcome culturally appropriating your plaid, shiplap, and vernacular architecture for a wedding venue, or wine tasting, but they have no interest in watching you spread manure, or see your barn light come on at 4 am when it's time to milk.

I don't have any simple answers, but I do feel it's necessary to share what we've been facing. While S.101 is something I fully support and a step in the right direction it's by no means the level of "Right to Practice Forestry" that I think Vermonter's have earned. It's important that we don't just give the illusion of protection when in reality most loggers are stretched so thin that just one week out of the woods on the phone finding a good lawyer and gathering documents for court could sink most outfits.

Since I was here last, it's been hard to watch 2 more farms be auctioned off. Both farms run by salt-of-the-earth people will now be moving with their families out of state. We're creating refugees of our Working

Landscape, people who will now live for rest of their lives not following their calling, not passing on traditions, and citizens unsatisfied with how their native land treated them. Why as a community we don't go into a form of mourning when a local farm closes in my mind is disgraceful. At a local meeting when Representative Mike Mrowicki brought up Stoneholm farm closing all it got from a room of 30 people were a couple of "awwwws".

We haven't been able to make any progress with our town about processing firewood on our farm. We're planning on giving up on that part of the business this spring. The benefit of being able to split firewood located at our farm meant that if I got an order for a cord of wood I could load the logs with our farm tractor, run the processor for 45 minutes, and go right back to wrapping round bales. It saved time and was efficient. We haven't been able to find this mythical place within Putney's perimeter that the town leadership spoke about where they would "accept the sound of equipment running." The fact that we have to duplicate all of the heavy equipment needed to move logs at the off-site location and pay rent on the land where the processor sits has proven financially impossible. Like the aforementioned dairy farmers, we can only lose so much money.

At our Town Meeting a couple who recently moved here from Southern California brought up the horrors of pollution associated with burning firewood. They said it shouldn't be encouraged as a form of heat for Vermonters. I could feel my heart stop beating for a second, my body tightened as if suspended in fear. The scenario that we joke about "*One day these people will even try to ban woodstoves!*" is closer to becoming reality. This is why we must be proactive in protecting those who work in our fields and forests. Radical ideas that are being proposed today in Putney's selectboards, planning commissions, and other town committees are shaping my individual community, but without intervention these ideas will be proposed in this distinguished building tomorrow. Within the next decade there will be even less legislators who have ever done evening chores on a farm, ever had their arms scratched from stacking hay bales on a hot August afternoon, or who know the difference between a skidder and harvester.

The major issues we are facing as a state are the results of a collapsed agrarian society:

-A farm is sold and the family loses drive, purpose, and lack of self-sufficiency. They aren't able to do what they love, what they know, and there's a sense of failure when you're the link in your genealogy who closes the family business. Rural poverty leads to alcohol or opiate addiction and reliance on government assistance.

-A farm is sold and the family leaves with it's children taking with them a great sense of work ethic. No coincidence our work force is struggling and school enrollment dropping making high per pupil spending unsustainable.

-A farm is sold and emotional support and social structure drastically changes. There's no longer loving family members to be the children's babysitter and society needs to provide childcare. There's no longer a network of extended family to provide oversight and there's an increase in early childhood trauma.

-A farm is auctioned off and now there's no roadside stand to get affordable food. The community has to buy processed food at the grocery store and society pays for the related health care issues.

-A farm is shut down and the family that always hunted with their grandchildren back in their sugarbush is no longer passing down firearm safety and the rural tradition of harvesting your own venison disappears.

We push farms and forestry operations to be bigger and bigger because we want our products cheap and we want it done in that mythical "over there" place out of earshot. Every week in the news is the vilification of the big dairies yet we all played a part in creating this system. They might be too large for what their land can sustain, they have to be big enough and they run around the clock. The labor force to work them doesn't exist at the wages they can pay so they go to a black market rife with immigration violations.

We're really in the last stages of our farming crisis in Vermont. We truly can't afford to lose anymore farms...It's possible that we already have lost too many to recover. While I know there are seemingly more important issues going on this year,I feel they are all just a distraction from the basic freedoms we want to protect. We must do everything in our power to keep it from becoming a suburban wasteland and keep Vermont's

heritage active. Anything that you're able to do to help keep the Working Landscape of Vermont viable is well worth the effort.