

TO: House Committee on Agriculture and Forestry
FROM: Put Blodgett, President, Vermont Woodlands Association
RE: S.34 Rural Economic Development Team
DATE: April 18, 2017

I salute the effort to "promote and facilitate community economic development in the small towns and rural areas of the State". Among the businesses or business types that the Rural Economic Development Team is to aid is listed "(C) the value-added forest products industry". Without a viable WOOD HARVESTING industry, there are few forest products for the value-added forest products industry to use. I would like to suggest dropping "value-added" and leaving the more inclusive "the forest products industry".

Further in the bill are over 2 pages dealing with the plight of dairy farmers and on page 7, (2)(A) "provide farmers with an equitable price for milk that is based on the costs of production". Pages 12-14 deal with help for nutrient management.

Having grown up on a Bradford daily farm and been a full-time dairy farmer for 15 years, I am much too well acquainted with the expenses to revenues ratio of milk production and the problems of manure runoff. I am delighted that this bill recognizes the importance of dairy farming to Vermont.

HOWEVER, trees cover 75% of Vermont and they provide landowners, loggers, truckers, sawmills, and the value-added forest products industry with jobs and income. Forest-based recreation, clean air and water, wildlife habitat and carbon sequestration add greatly to the importance of Vermont's forests.

But, an aging timber-harvesting workforce and the expense of entering the field is creating a shortage of workers to properly manage our forests. It used to be that an industrious young man could enter the logging business with a horse or team and an axe and a saw, later, with a crawler and chain saw, next came a skidder and chain saw. Now, a mechanized operation can cost over a million dollars.

The Legislature has recognized the situation in dairy farming and has passed many laws to assist it, including the elimination of the sales tax on farm equipment and repairs. Timber harvesters and firewood processors would be greatly benefited by the similar treatment proposed in this bill.

On page 14 under (51) I suggest "grapple and cable skidders" rather than "skidders with grapple and cable". I have yet to see a skidder with both grapple and cable.

The high cost of Workers' Compensation causes many loggers to work alone in a very dangerous occupation. The study created in Section 9a. to research any possible reduction in cost is a very worthwhile endeavor.

I hope the committee will vote favorably on S.34.