

February 4, 2020

VT House Committee on Agriculture and Forestry

Re: H.794 Agritourism Liability

Rep. Partridge and members of the VT House Committee on Agriculture and Forestry,

Thank you for allowing me to testify to you concerning H. 794 on agritourism liability. My name is Beth Kennett. My husband, Bob, and I lived in Addison in 1975 working with Bob's family on a dairy farm, then purchased our own farm in Rochester in 1979. We milk 100 Holsteins with our family and are part of the Cabot Creamery Cooperative. In 1984, instigated by the volatility of the dairy economy, we chose to open our home and provide lodging and meals to guests as a source of diversified income. This enterprise became known as "agritourism". Over the past 36 years I worked with other farm families to build a strong base for agritourism in Vermont. For over 20 years I served as a leader with the VT Farms Association, a statewide group of farms representing the diversity of agricultural experiences in Vermont: maple, apple, sheep, wineries, Christmas trees and types of tours, school trips, farmstays. I have also served on the board of Farmstay US. Vermont's agritourism has grown exponentially over the past 30 years. In October 2020 Vermont will host the 2nd International Agritourism conference. The first was 2 years ago in Italy and we are the host site for the second worldwide workshop on agritourism. Vermont farmers have worked with the University of Vermont Extension, VT Chamber of Commerce, VT state agencies and various partners through the years to develop an economic enterprise that contributes to our farm families, Vermont agriculture, to our communities, and to our State.

Agritourism is a significant economic opportunity for rural communities. The multiplier effect of an individual farm hosting guests impacts everyone from the local gas station, hardware store, grocery, restaurants, service providers of all categories. The increased interest in farm to table, food production, and experiential tourism has blossomed in the past 10 years. It is in the best interests of all of us to protect and enhance our agritourism businesses. Hosting guests from across the country and around the world is a significant responsibility, in my opinion. I take very seriously the safety and security of my guests and our farm. I also take seriously the integrity of Vermont, our agricultural products, our tourism opportunities and our image. It is important to me to do everything in my ability to safeguard our farm and Vermont agritourism from harm. Over the years we made certain to provide information on insurance, risk management and liability issues; working with Dr. Lisa Chase to set up workshops for farm families, bringing in various insurance speakers; working with Dr. Julie Smith on biosecurity issues for farms; creating educational programs with Shelburne Farms and other partners. In addition, UVM Extension maintains a website with resources for agritourism including information on safety, risk and liability. We have been fortunate that agritourism has grown to be an accepted business enterprise by the insurance industry. Thirty years ago, no one knew what agritourism was or how to spell it. I was very fortunate to always have an insurance agent who understood and worked with me to safeguard our business.

Thank you for considering H.794. I feel strongly we can do more to be pro-active; encourage our farms and aid their economic diversification. Thank you for your time. Please let me know if you have any further questions or me or need more information on the impact of agritourism in Vermont.

Beth Kennett
Liberty Hill Farm
Rochester, VT
beth@libertyhillfarm.com
802-767-3926

