

Notes for Senate Ag. Committee Testimony

Jon Erickson

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Thank you Senator Starr and members of the committee.

I'd like to share some thoughts on the theme of what we do NOW, in the midst of crisis, to move to a different future for Vermont's food system.

My comments connect to Secretary Tebbets statements that the #1 ask from dairy farms is help with transition plans, and that we have to start thinking about how to build a resilient regional food system.

My testimony also builds on Senator Starr's comment that with this crisis it's time to start thinking differently.

The place to start is to ask:

- What are the overarching goals of our Vermont food system?
- What is the current state of our system relative to these goals?
- And what would a comprehensive plan look like to get us *from* here *to* there?

Before I suggest some goals and some potential steps to get us there, let's consider the current state of the production and consumption of Vermont's food system.

On the production side, we know we have a largely export-oriented, commodity-based industry on a shrinking agricultural land base that is highly dependent on the outside world for production inputs *and* consumer demand.

- In the depths of the Great Depression in 1935, more than 60% of Vermont's land was in agriculture. Today it's under 15%.
- 80% of remaining farmland is concentrated in the single industry of dairy which accounts for 60 to 70% of our states agricultural sales. About 85% of milk and dairy products are exported. NO OTHER STATE is so dominated by a single agricultural commodity.
- The land base and total herd size in dairy has shrunk considerably since the 1930s, but dairy production has more than doubled by transitioning to an input-intensive model.

- Animal density has increased 250%. Milk per cow has increased 500%. And we've substituted less and less land in agriculture for more and more imported inputs, including high-energy grains.
- The dominant model of the vast majority of Vermont's agriculture production is heavily dependent on outside inputs and outside markets in which we have little to no control.
- The only way we compete is by cutting costs through greater reliance on mechanization, migrant labor, and decades of looking the other way on our environmental impact. When that's not enough, we borrow money, make the equipment dealers and grain importers wealthy, and hope for federal subsidies dictated by mid-western farm politics.
- Is this the moment when we say "enough is enough" and set a new course?

On the consumption side, the vast majority of food calories consumed in Vermont arrive through corporate controlled, national and international supply chains with long food miles, high food waste, and low-quality calories.

- The latest data from our Farm to Plate program tallies local food sales at 12.9% in 2017, up from 9.7% in 2014. We're doing a bit better than the New England average of 10%.
- However, access to the local food system is much, much lower to large portions of our population. 1 in 7 Vermonter's are on food stamps (SNAP), there are a dozen or more food deserts in Vermont in rural farm communities, and recent data on food insecurity¹ before the pandemic was at 18.3% of all households.
- Survey research just done on food insecurity in the first weeks of the pandemic led by Dr. Meredith Niles of UVM found a significant increase, with over 24% of surveyed households now food insecure. They also found 35% of these households are newly food insecure, and 70% of experienced a job loss or disruption caused by the coronavirus.
- Is this also the moment when we look to our own to provide for our own?

These are just a few highlights of a highly vulnerable Vermont food system that has been made all too clear in this current pandemic.

¹ The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) [defines food insecurity as a lack of consistent access to enough food for an active, healthy life.](#)

The goals of a comprehensive food system transformation, in my mind, would be to:

1. Transition away from a single commodity, export-oriented model to a diverse, multi-functional, agro-ecological system.
2. Move away from a demoralized and (in the case of migrant workers) dehumanized farm labor system and towards farm families with living wages and full benefits, supported by an engaged citizenry who are genuinely participating in the Vermont food system.
3. Reduce our reliance on a corporate controlled, national and international food supply chain, and build a system of regionally coordinated, connected, and resilient food hubs that all Vermonters can afford and access.

What might a comprehensive transformation plan look like?

Many elements are already in place, but in an underfunded and isolated approach.

- VT Agricultural and Food Systems Plan released in January of this year as a joint effort between the VT Agency of Ag, Food, and Markets and the Vermont Sustainable Jobs Fund.
 - Result of Act 83 signed into law by Governor Scott last May
 - Product by product identification of bottlenecks and gaps in business and technical assistance, farmer-to-farmer peer education, and product marketing
- This food systems plan is also Part One of a “Farm to Plate” 2.0 strategic plan to help guide the next ten years of work of the Vermont Sustainable Jobs Fund, with Part Two in the works.
 - Designated by the legislature in 2009, the Fund has good broad buy-in, and its reauthorization in 2019 for another 10 years position it as a possible home to a truly comprehensive food system transformation plan with overarching goals around food security, regional food system resilience, and transition to new product standards around a healthy food system.
- NOFA-VT’s work, Maddie Kempner presented elements of this in testimony last week, with very important elements on both the supply and demand side of Vermont’s food system transition, including:
 - Universal school meals program

- Local purchasing incentive bill, with clear mandates for schools, correction facilities, hospitals, and other state or quasi-state facilities.
- Creation of a Vermont food sovereignty law, similar to efforts in Maine.
- Coordinated import substitution program to support expansion of local organic agriculture in Vermont.
- Land access support for beginning farmers and farmers of color.
- Coordination with the health department on a phase out of the use of chemicals toxic to pollinator, aquatic, wildlife, and human health.
- New England Food Vision, with a goal of 50% of our food produced within the region by 2060.
- Green New England Deal is also in the works, built on a basic needs framework, including: housing, healthcare, food, energy, transportation, and clean air and water.

What's missing is a vision for Vermont's food system that benefits *all* constituents of our food system.

What's lacking are resources for coordination and long-term planning, beyond a single commodity or the current growing season or the current crisis.

What's needed is an approach that invests in system resilience, with targets, milestones, and new mandates.

Our food system needs something akin to Vermont's energy transition plan, and it can't simply be a plan to save an export-oriented, commodity-bound dairy sector that cannot compete in the current market landscape.

Again, the pieces of the comprehensive puzzle are everywhere.

Coordinating local and regional supply chains will require:

- Regular needs assessments at appropriate scales.
- A state agriculture department that takes a whole systems approach to building resilience in our food system.
- And investment in planning capacity for food hub managers.

Enabling and supporting the current and future labor force and a more engaged citizenry in Vermont's food system transition requires support for:

- Apprenticeships and farm transition plans
- Ecological restoration of decades of farm field compaction and soil erosion
- Robust urban agriculture projects and community gardens
- Again, land access support for beginning farmers and farmers of color.
- And incentives for worker- and consumer- owned cooperatives tied to local and organic food access goals.

A comprehensive, multi-sector approach would bring in resources from health, energy, and development, recognizing that a resilient food system contributes to good human health outcomes, a more engaged transition to renewable energy (especially in rural communities), and a rural development model that attracts and retains workers.

And perhaps most immediately, the state needs to direct resources to create more local demand by:

- Increasing local food in "public kitchens", including hospitals, schools, colleges & universities.
- Creating local food mandates tied to public money.
- Negotiate reliable institutional contracts at regional and state scales.
- And institute aggressive import substitution policies focused on food system resilience, access, and diversification.

Returning to "normal" in Vermont's food system should not be the goal. Normal was already in crisis.

Thank you for taking my testimony, and I hope there's time for some discussion.