

**Chair Stevens, Ranking Member Murphy, and Representatives of the House Committee on General, Housing, and Military Affairs, thank you for the opportunity to speak to you today.**

My name is Brian Lowe, the new Executive Director of the Vermont Council on Rural Development, or VCRD. VCRD is an independent, non-partisan non-profit dedicated to the support of the locally-defined progress of Vermont's communities.

I have been asked to speak to the history of the Working Lands Enterprise Board, and to be brief.

So, I will focus my testimony on three points: How the Working Lands Enterprise Board came into being, some of the important elements of that process, and the current state of affairs.

It is important to note that this was a grassroots effort that preceded my time at VCRD, and so credit belongs to many others across the state. Many farmers, foresters, loggers, and other leaders of Working Lands enterprises deserve credit, as does Paul Costello, members of different State Administrations – including Lynn Ellen Schimoler and Abbie Willard, and, critically, many members of the Legislature who turned the work of many voices into a very meaningful, productive program. Many Legislators played a role, but Representative Partridge, Chairwoman of the Ag and Forest Committee, and former Representative Will Stevens, played major roles.

On the first point, how the Working Lands Enterprise Board came into being, it started with a major statewide effort led by VCRD called the Council on the Future of Vermont. This two year effort, from 2007 to 2009, engaged hundreds of Vermonters in dialogue about the State's past and present. A major finding of that report was that more than 97 percent of Vermonters found great value in the working landscape of the state ... not just for its importance to Vermont's economy or its draw for tourism, but because the landscape represented much of what Vermonters loved about this state and our communities.

That love for and respect of the Working Landscape was matched by some significant threats to those farm and forest enterprises that made their living

off the land. And so, the extensive effort of the Council on Vermont's Future led to the creation of a Working Lands Partnership, focused on the question of what could be done to make Working Lands enterprises more sustainable.

That Partnership, which was hundreds strong, had a leadership Council that produced an Action Plan focused on thoughtful strategies for investing in Vermont's farm and forest future. And it was from that plan, released in September of 2011, that Legislative leaders like Will Stevens, Tess Tayler, Carolyn Branagan, Mollie Burke, and others drafted H. 496. This bill ultimately passed through the Legislature and was signed into law as Act 142, An Act Related to Preserving Vermont's Working Landscape, which created the Working Lands Enterprise Fund and the Board that oversees it.

The second point to make is the importance of several elements in this process.

- The first element was time. The Council for Vermont's Future was convened in 2007. The Working Lands Partnership was organized in 2010 and released its action plan in 2011. Legislators transformed these voices and plans into concrete Legislative action and a very productive, meaningful program that has since benefited hundreds of farm and forest enterprises, produced more than 500 jobs, and had a return on investment in excess of \$5 for every \$1 spent through 2020 (the most recent ROI available).
- The second important element of this process was people – this is truly a program that is the result of extensive public input over an extended period and deliberative thought and action based on that input.
- And the third element to highlight today is the program design. It is intended to serve Vermonters across the state, and it does reach all 14 counties, providing valuable resources to support practical projects in all areas of Vermont.

The third and final point I will share is an update on where things currently stand with the Working Lands Enterprise Initiative.

- First, I want to thank Legislators who have already appropriated an additional \$2.1 million for Working Lands this current FY as part of the BAA process. That quick action has put a total of about \$7.5 million into the Working Lands program this year. That is a great achievement, and

it will be well used, especially since the total number of viable applications is expected to exceed that total by about \$1 million.

- Second, I also want to thank the Governor and his team for their budget proposal this year, which does increase the base annual funding for the Working Lands program to \$1 million.
- And third, given that there has been significant unmet need with allocations of \$7.5 million this current year and about \$3.5 million in fiscal year '21, we suspect that the \$1 million allocation for FY23 currently before the Legislature will likely leave very significant unmet need.
- As part of the Working Lands Coalition, VCRD continues to advocate for a transformational investment into the Working Lands Enterprise Fund of \$15 million in one-time funds, to be spent over 3 years.
- As you weigh H. 273 and the need to increase access to land and home ownership, that known need for further investment and increased capital access for working lands enterprises more broadly is an important consideration.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today.