

Good Morning.

It's an honor to be with you and we look forward to a productive and safe session. We stand ready to help you with your work crafting policy that improves the lives of Vermonters. In a moment I will introduce you to our directors---they will be your key contacts for a variety of issues whether it's protecting animal health, making sure our food is safe, protecting our waterway or improving the agriculture economy from the farm to the table; this group will get you the information you need to make your decisions. Lean on them—they are solid managers who understand their fields of expertise.

Over the last four years working closely with this committee we have done our best to approach each issue with common sense, facts, and an attitude of “how do we get to yes”.

A few highlights I would like to share since we last left you in our virtual world. Across our agency we have been focused on the current pandemic. We are doing our best to keep everyone safe and healthy. Our agriculture community has stood tall, working non-stop to feed us. We are thankful for their work whether its on the farm, orchard, slaughterhouse or in the processing plant. Agriculture remained open and is open as we weave our way through this pandemic.

We are also working non-stop to improve the economy. We have just completed an historic program that provided nearly \$26 million dollars in grants, sending our dollars to hundreds of businesses so they could pay their bill thru this pandemic. Your work, which allowed us to do our work, was critical. Thank you. You helped Vermonters.

A few highlights:

- Since July 2020, when applications first launched, the Agency has provided direct technical assistance support via phone or email to approximately 6,500 businesses and partners



about the various applications and produced 12 weekly newsletter e-blasts with grant related content, receiving over 39,200 opens by recipients.

- The Agency collaborated with VHCB Farm Viability Network advisors to support applicants and since March the COVID Response & Recovery Coaching program assisted more than 520 working lands businesses, including nearly 400 businesses that received support with their VCAAP applications.
- Since July 2020, the Agency has awarded CRF grants to 1,136 businesses and invested \$25,647,059.95 toward mitigating the business impacts experienced due to this pandemic. We are in the process of gathering additional aggregate data on industry needs and impacts of these CRF investments and plan to share a more comprehensive report with the legislature later in January/February 2021.
- Our work is not done here. We know there are still needs and gaps. We do have to examine meat processing. Our slaughterhouses have not stopped and could do more---if they had help with labor and infrastructure. Stay tuned. The latest federal CARES program does have dollars for small and medium sized facilities, but it is too early to tell where Vermont fits in.

Over the summer and fall I have had discussions with Governor about the future of Agriculture. Governor Scott has instructed me and the Agency to look deeper, and over the coming weeks, you will hear more from us on long term strategies to grow our Agriculture economy. We know it is critical to Vermont future. Stay tuned. We will be back.

I also want to highlight two areas of significant progress since we last met.

- The Agency has launched the Northeast Dairy Business Innovation Center. This came about after the Agency's Dairy Summit, led by dairy farmers, and attended by many of you in Jay in April of 2019. We sought funding and were successful with a \$6.5 million dollar grant from USDA. Our thanks to Senator Leahy and our delegation who are partners—all committed to improving the dairy economy. This center is one of three centers around the country. The center provides our farmers technical assistance, contracts, and grants—



supporting cow, goat and sheep dairy businesses as they look to improve their bottom line. Our dairy farmers are always adapting and changing to the markets and this center is focused on new strategies.

- We also looking at ways to improve the environment. Our farmers are on the front lines and have invested millions over the last few years on conservation projects that are protecting our waterways from runoff. We also will launch a NEW program with help of USDA-NRCS. In short, it is called pay for performance. The \$7 million dollar grant awarded to the Agency will give monetary incentives to go above and beyond Vermont's stringent environmental regulations. We are excited to launch this project this year with Vermont's farmers and partners. The Vermont Land Trust is also focused on this strategy and researchers at UVM are encouraged by this innovative approach.

I could go on for a long time---but wanted to highlight a few things as you begin your important work. We also have the team with us and would like to introduce them to you now.

