

House Agriculture, Forestry and Food Resiliency Committee

VT Agency of Agriculture, Food and Markets Testimony Talking Points

Abbey Willard

Madison Berry

4/30/24

Maple Industry Background:

- According to the National Agricultural Statistics Service
 - Anecdotal maple industry report is that 2024 was a very good season across the state of VT (and interestingly not as strong a season in Canada)
 - Total gallons of VT syrup produced in 2023: 2,045,000 (49% total domestic crop)
 - Total gallons of VT syrup produced in 2022: 2,524,000 (51% total domestic crop)
- Our ADG Maple application data
 - 352 total applications totaling over \$18 million (previous record for AgDev was 191).
 - Funding Priorities (applicants could choose more than one)
 - 96% addressed operational efficiency
 - 62% addressed climate resilience
 - 58% addressed food safety
 - Program Outcomes
 - Increased Production: 70%
 - Increased Viability: 82%
 - Increased Food Safety/Quality: 60%
 - Applicants ranged from back yard operations with 50 taps, to major commercial enterprises with 150,000+ taps.

Impetus:

- Future of Vermont Agriculture Commission Report recommendation to invest in infrastructure in growing agricultural industries – maple, produce, and meat production and processing

Eligibility:

- With access to unprecedented funds targeted at maple, AgDev opted to provide a fairly broad range of eligibility.
- Applicants had to be maple producers or processors in the state of VT. Sap-only operations were eligible. Projects needed to address one of three funding priorities (operational efficiency, climate resilience, and/or food safety).
- Projects fell between \$15,000 and \$100,000. Average ask was approximately \$54,000.
- Applicants could be start-up businesses.
- No match was required
 - UNIQUE TO DIVISION, opportunity to identify how no match would change the application process and applicant demographic.

Review Process:

- We had 331 applications after basic project eligibility review.
- Reviewers
 - Recruited 63 reviewers, primarily from backgrounds of: maple production, maple research, agricultural business and viability, and agricultural experts. We had reviewers from UVM and UVM Extension, Cornell, UMaine, NOFA-VT, VEDA, Vermont Land Trust, VMSMA, The Intervale, Audubon VT, as well as from the Vermont Agency of Agriculture and Dept of Forest Parks & Rec.
 - We conducted our standard agency Conflict of Interest process to identify and reassign projects that reviewers felt posed a real or perceived COI.
- Scoring
 - Applications were scored on the following criteria (as outlined in the RFA)
 - **Funding priorities** – project effectively and clearly addresses one or more of the funding priorities, and has thought out how this project will improve their operation through one or more of these priorities.
 - **Program outcomes** – has fully explained their objectives, and has clear, tangible goals that relate to the RFA priorities.
 - **Quality of project plan** – this project is feasible within the budget, timeline, or expertise of the applicant. Project is important to the sustainability, viability, or development of this operation.
 - **Efficient use of funds** - scope, timeline, and use of funds are reasonable and thoughtful.
 - **Technical expertise** – project addresses any needs for technical assistance
 - **Long term impact** – this project has a lasting, positive impact on the applicant’s business, and is a project that can be maintained/sustained for several years.
 - **A holistic score was also given independent of the above criteria**
 - Each application was scored three times and final total and holistic scores averaged.
 - Reviewers also left feedback addressing questions, concerns, and strengths of each project.
 - Scores ranged from 23 to 98.67. Average score was 78.47.
 - Reviewers received the Request for Applications, scoring criteria, and additional guidance on scoring each application. Each project was scored on its own merits and outcomes, not in comparison with other projects.
 - Intention was to score based on project quality, *not* on writing quality (equity focus)
- Review
 - The highest scoring applications – 90+ total, or 4.5+ holistic – were pulled to discuss with an internal granting and maple-focused review team.
 - Addressing discrepancies:
 - Applications with a large gap between scores that impacted the application’s inclusion in the review process were also pulled and addressed.
 - A total of 84 applications were discussed in review.

- Internal team discussed each application, its scores, and reviewer notes. We addressed as a group a variety of factors:
 - Scoring and scoring criteria
 - Alignment with program goals
 - Quality of project plan and impact on operation
 - Feasibility and reasonability of projects
 - Diversity of project types
 - Diversity of locations within the state
 - Diversity of operation type and size
 - Considerations of request as simply increasing production vs. improving operation viability, sustainability, quality of life, etc.
 - Review committee was cognizant of the risks associated with simply adding more maple syrup to the market
 - Considerations of request as “cost of doing business” vs “innovation/improvement”
 - Applicant's previous Ag Dev Division funding history (how recently had they received a working lands or other grant from our agency)

Awardees:

- We made eleven awards totaling \$542,350.
 - AgDev made \$66,650 in additional maple industry investments via WLEI.
- Awards fell between \$21,250 and \$100,000. Average award was approximately \$49,000.
- Awardees averaged approximately 7800 taps, but covered from 500 to 30,000.
- Awardees represented a range of operation types, from start-up, to small producers, to large commercial operation.
- All awardees produce or plan to produce their own syrup. Two awardees purchase sap from other producers
 - In 2022, purchased 513,000 gallons of sap from 16 producers. 481,000 from 15 in 2023.
- Awardees came from 7 counties (initially 8, with one award declined).
 - Addison, Chittenden, Franklin, Lamoille, Orange, Orleans, Rutland
- Projects address a range of focuses, priorities, and areas of operation:
 - Maple processing equipment
 - Sugarbush monitoring equipment
 - Firewood processing equipment
 - Sap storage and finished product storage
 - Road and infrastructure improvements
 - Food safety improvements, including lead mitigation
 - VMSMA Sugarhouse Certification eligibility
 - Efficiency upgrades and improvements
- All eleven projects are underway, with plans to run through the 2025 sugaring season.
- List of Awardees:
 - Atkins Family Farm (Addison) – \$94,000 for evaporator upgrades for food safety and efficiency improvements.

- Blackberry Hill Maple Syrup & Logging (Orange) – \$21,250 for construction of a separate, food-safe area for canning and visitors.
- Blackmore Farms (Franklin) – \$26,112 for evaporator and processing upgrades for food safety and efficiency improvements.
- Couture’s Maple Shop and B&B (Orleans) – \$46,689 for reverse-osmosis machine for food safety and efficiency improvements.
- Dalestead Farm & Maple (Franklin) – \$100,000 for increased storage capacity, improvement to sap transport, and a high-efficiency reverse osmosis machine.
- Foxglove Farm (Addison) – \$26,977 for construction of a new, high-efficiency area for processing and bottling, as well as improvements for reduction in wood use.
- Honey-Do, LLC (Lamoille) – \$75,000 for construction of new building to support launch of new, co-operative production model.
- Idle Hour Maple (Rutland) – \$22,669 for installation of vacuum monitoring system for steep sloped operation.
- Johnson Farm (Chittenden) – \$57,900 for installation of new potable well and kitchen area for improved food safety.
- Parent Boys Sugaring (Franklin) – \$24,700 for upgraded firewood processor to improve efficiency.
- Umbrella Hill (Lamoille) – \$56,046 for climate-resilient improvements to sugarbush roadways in response to flooding.

Unmet Need:

- Of eligible applications that scored our average (78.47) or above, we have \$9.2 million of unmet need
- What were the most common types of requests?
 - Equipment upgrades and purchases, primarily reverse osmosis machines and evaporators. Largely focused on efficiency and reducing time/labor for the producer (quality of life improvements), but also utility cost/emissions.
 - Vacuum monitoring systems to identify leaks in sap lines, thus improving vacuum pressure and yield
 - Sap storage, primarily at the site of processing
 - General sap collection infrastructure, e.g. lines and pumps
 - Measurable number of sap-only operations seeking to move into syrup production
- Why did this inspire such a huge response?
 - First and largest state funding opportunity for maple specifically
 - Strongly marketed by VMSMA and other partners – broad distribution of opportunity
 - No match, more accessible; broad eligibility
 - Extremely difficult 2023 production season
 - Aging producer population seeking to make their operations viable for a generational transfer; many applications were done by the outgoing generation OR the incoming younger generation
 - Production increases must be met with infrastructure investments
 - Aging infrastructure, rapidly improving/evolving technology
 - Costs have skyrocketed, revenues have not

- How do we intend to assist these unfunded applicants/businesses?
 - Will offer specific application feedback, if requested
 - Other funding sources, programs, and supports offered as part of AAFM feedback
 - Conversations with TA community about coordinated response for unmet need across ADG and WLEI programs
 - Exploring grant accessibility and funding support approach by Ag Dev Division in FY25
 - CDS proposals to Welch and Balint