

Marie Audet with Senate Ag, on H-706, April 9, 2024

Farmers are charged with growing affordable food, that is safe, and farmed in a way that protects our land, animals and air.

My name is Marie Audet, from Blue Spruce Farm and Audet's Cow power located on Rte 22A, in Bridport, VT. We are raising our 4th generation—a total of 21 family members, including six under 9.

This past year we grew 1400 acres of corn, 450 acres of soybean 2100 acres of hay to feed our 1500 registered milking cows and the same number of youngstock on the front end, and feed our anerobic digester with what comes out the back end which generates renewable energy. The manure goes through a Dissolved Floation System that removes 70 – 78% of P, before it goes into storage to be used to fertilize the fields, closing the loop.

New to our farm and an increasing number of other farms, we are replacing imported feed with feed grown in our watershed. In 2023, we invested in our own on farm grain facility. Additionally, we have over ½ dozen farmer neighbors, who have shifted from milking cows to selling their corn and soybeans to us, eliminating a middleman and travel out of state for them.

If we were to stop growing corn, we would have to import 1/3 more feed which would bring with it 7.5% more P. I know this because UVM was preparing a workshop addressing the opportunities around increasing growing our own forages and UVM Agronomist Abbie Aurgutone was at the farm recently to work with our nutritionist to calculate the impact.

As we are focusing on becoming more sustainable in this regard, growing more of the feed within our watershed and reducing importing these nutrients, you can imagine our concern with removing a technology that has assured reliable crop production before understanding the impact. These same regenerative

practices, no till, minimum till, and cover crops may INCREASE risk of higher insect pressure on our plantings as they feed off decaying organic matter. UVM agronomists can't answer these and many of our questions until more studies are done. We specifically want to set up a trial with UVM Extension to plant some acres of untreated seed. Untreated seed, of a quality we can trust is NOT available at this time. The AIB has laid out the work that needs to be done. We need research, and support to ensure a successful transition.

You have been hearing from many farmers regarding the adaptation of conservation practices. For the record, are not afraid of change. Vermont farmers lead the nation in this regard. Between 2012 and 2017, we increased our areas of no-till by 173%, the biggest increase in the US according to the 2017 US Census of Agriculture. We ranked in the top 7 states in the country for our 101% increase in adoption of cover crops.

What does this mean? Increasing 1% organic matter in our soil can result in up to 20,000 gallons of available water stored per acre. Organic matter continues to increase—in fields where we had measurements for 2009 and 2023, show an increase of 1.3%. That means extreme rain events like last July would have been worse. At the annual meeting of our Addison County Farmer Coalition in January, Julie Moore said the improvements in land management mitigated the devastating effects from the July rains. Additionally, during dry spells, healthy soils retain needed moisture.

Dr. Joshua Falkner, who is a research assistant professor and Farming and Climate Change Program coordinator for the UVM Extension Center for Sustainable Agriculture is part of a multi-million dollar, multi year field research study describing it as one of the first in the country that will study direct links between soil health, water quality, and greenhouse gas emissions. They are measuring the results of different practices to inform us for an even more sustainable future.

I say all this to highlight that Vermont Dairy Farmers are striving for continuous improvements on so many fronts and hope we are included—along with all of Vermont’s farmers—in ensuring the successful agricultural future we all want. I hope you can join us in supporting the Ag Innovation Board’s requests to gain the knowledge we need before eliminating this reliable technology.