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Rural Vermont Introduction  
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Legislative Director

Dear House Committee on Agriculture, Food Resiliency and Forestry,

We at Rural Vermont appreciate the successful collaboration with legislators on this committee over the course of our 40 year history as a non-profit organization that advocates, organizes and educates on issues that affect the agrarian communities that feed us all.

### **Recent and pending legislation**

We celebrate and thank you for last years passage of Act 93 that now allows poultry producers to sell on-farm slaughtered poultry not just as whole birds but also in parts. Rural Vermont is known for its work in favor of the on-farm slaughter of poultry and livestock for many years and we are proud to currently spearhead federal legislation with the leadership from Senator Welch and Senator Sanders and support from our Agency of Agriculture, Food and Markets. The Livestock Owned by Communities to Advance Local Foods Act (LOCAL Foods Act) would clarify in the Federal Meat Inspection Act that it is legal when farmers sell livestock alive and the new owners have the animal slaughtered on the farm where it was raised without inspection. We are excited that our Senators will reintroduce the LOCAL Foods Act in the new Congress and we believe this bi-partisan issue has good chances to pass with the new farm bill as its one of the few initiatives that does not involve a money request and that would simply clarify in law what is already written in USDA guidance.

### **Rural Vermont Members**

In my role as Legislative Director for Rural Vermont I am monitoring much of your committee activity as we are sharing information about pending legislation with our members and strive to organize for opportunities of our farmers to voice their concerns and ideas with you directly in the legislative process. For over a decade we have been collaborating with you all and NOFA-VT to have Small Farm Action Days here in the State House where farmers, activists and food enthusiasts learn about the legislative process and get a chance to speak to the agriculture committees. We hope to schedule two Small Farm Action Days this session and for your continued support to hear what concerns farmers may voice in this format. Please know me as a resource to organize for farmer input on legislation relevant to the agricultural community.

## Conservation

I've been representing Rural Vermont in the Vermont Conservation Strategy Initiative on the Agricultural Lands Working Group this past year. The VCSI is Vermont's 30x30/50x50 process led by the Vermont Housing and Conservation Board and the Agency of Natural Resources to implement Act 59 of 2023, and act relating to community resilience and biodiversity protection. During the inventory phase of this engagement process we've been dissatisfied with the transparency of the process and its compliance with public meeting laws and Vermont's environmental justice policy. Last fall, Vermont Law School's Center for Agriculture and Food Systems had one of their students research the issue who suggested that: "Act 59 implementation — now known as the Vermont Conservation Strategy Initiative (VCSI) — has fallen short of compliance with the state's Open Meeting and Environmental Justice Laws." For example: "The records posted under VHCB's VCSI page are inconsistent and unorganized (...). While some of the required information is there, it appears incomplete and is not clearly presented." A second memo researched where 30x30 is coming from nationally and internationally and is exploring Rural Vermont's concern that the initiative is intended to serve the development of carbon markets here in Vermont. We are part of the largest international food sovereignty movement La Via Campesina and the National Family Farmer Coalition who call carbon markets false solutions to climate change because they are designed to commodify nature and to enrich Natural Asset Companies instead of realizing the systematic changes farmers voice they need to grow more food and become better land managers. The research indicates that some states use carbon markets as a funding source, but not all states anticipate carbon markets as a source of revenue to realize 30x30.

Finally a third research paper looked at alternative pathways towards community resilience and biodiversity protection as permanent land conservation with easements would cost Vermont approximately a total of \$375 million over the next five years to reach the 30x30 goal (not including administrative expenses and land management costs). We at Rural Vermont stress that this pathway would contribute to drive the already occurring property price inflation and the in-affordability of farmland for farmers and the lack of equitable housing access so that alternatives are needed. Without going into too much or any detail of the recommendations of the research paper specifically, I do want to mention that this is the discourse Rural Vermont is seeking with our membership and allies and that we are in the process of gathering and brainstorming ideas to protect farmland from development and to make farmland affordable for a new generation of farmers who currently belong to the demographics who trend to leave the state again because of the property price inflation.

We also spoke with the Governor's Future of Agriculture Commission about this issue and are looking forward where the work of that commission may lead this year. I also want to mention that neither of the recent land use laws that passed the legislature center the protection of farmland from development (namely the Act 250 revision in Act 181 of 2024, the River Corridor Legislation in Act 121 of 2024, the Home Act 47 of 2023, but also not the mentioned Act 59 of 2024 that centers biodiversity protection or the Global Warming Solutions Act 153 of 2020).

I have also been serving as a commissioner on the Two Rivers Ottauquechee Regional Commission for a couple of months – that is Vermont's largest Regional Planning Commission (RPC). This year will be a huge year for RPC's across the state to implement the recent land use laws mentioned and to review the relevant sections of their regional plans. I will share that TRORCs regional plan currently doesn't itemize agricultural land on it's map at all (it's all a lump sum "Rural" area).

### **Accessory On-Farm Businesses**

Rural Vermont has advocated since 2017 that a farm's limited development of an Accessory On Farm Businesses ("AOFB") should not subject the parcel to Act 250 regulation. For Rural Vermont, scale-appropriate regulation of AOFBs has been a core part of its mission to promote community-scale farms and the local food and relationships that they provide.

At the very end of the 2024 legislative session, the Vermont legislature passed a law that now requires farms that offer farm stays or farm events as an accessory on-farm business to get an Act 250 permit. It also hinders the development of value-added products (the preparation or processing of farm products) as an Act 250 permit is now required unless the AOFB will make at least 50 percent of the total annual sales from products produced on the farm where the business is located. Rural Vermont reported on this legislation, which was introduced as H.128 with support from the Vermont Agency of Agriculture, Food and Markets (VAAFAM). We expressed concern around the impacts these changes would have on the farming community to VAAFAM and did not endorse the bill, as many farms who operated AOFBs were previously under the impression they were exempt from Act 250. H. 128 did not pass but the critical language was adopted last minute into a major land use bill, H. 687, that did pass (Act 181, Section 18 on p. 25). We started to receive complaints from some of our members about this new policy this past year and are now looking for legislators who are willing to work with us more on this issue to ensure that the regulation of AOFBs upholds the legislative intent to support farms that do accessory businesses - which are essential to compliment the viability of farming.

Thank You!