

House Committee on Agriculture, Food Resiliency, and Forestry

1.16.2025

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Good morning, and thank you to the committee for inviting us in today. My name is Graham Unangst-Rufenacht, I'm the policy director at Rural VT, and I'm going to start out our introduction to the committee and then hand it over to Caroline, our Legislative Director.

1. Rural Vermont was founded in 1985 - this is our 40th year and I hope to show you all a little of this history today. We are a state-wide, member based, farmer and farmworker led, not-for-profit organization based in Montpelier. We extend an open invitation to this committee for collaboration in hearing from community members and other experts on issues that may be before you, and in general hope you'll see us as a resource and partner in making policy.
2. We are a horizontally led organization with 5 part time staff directors, and a board of more than 12 people with majority farmers and farmworkers. When we say we are member led, we mean that we work with our members and non-members and allied organizations to educate, organize and advocate based on issues identified and determined by our communities based on need and opportunity.
3. Rural VT's mission is to organize, educate and advocate in collaboration with local and global movements to strengthen the social, ecological and economic health of the agrarian communities that connect us all.
4. We work primarily at the local and State levels - however we also advocate and collaborate in national and international spaces directly and through our membership in the National Family Farm Coalition (where Caroline and I share a seat on the Executive Committee) and La Via Campesina, a peasant and food sovereignty based organization which is one of the largest social movements in the world (where our Director of Grass Roots Organizing Mollie Wills is the primary liaison).
5. As this is an introduction to Rural VT, this is new biennium, and it is our 40th anniversary - I thought I'd take a little time to bring you through some of our history, some of the work that's happened in the statehouse over time, and some of the issues we've focused on and people we've worked with. I'm going to move quickly through some of this - and try to save most of our time for discussion about work this session with myself and Caroline.
6. [SLIDES of HISTORY of work and getting into current work]

7. What am I working on now as a priority this session:

a. The Farm Security Fund

- i. We are asking the legislature to pass the Farm Security Fund. This is a new piece of legislation that will provide reliable, rapidly available recovery funds to farmers impacted by climate emergencies and extreme weather.
- ii. Rural VT has worked with NOFA VT and a large group of stakeholders in the agricultural community over a number of months to consider: the impacts of some of our more significant recent climate and weather related events, how farms / farmers / farmworkers and those supporting them have needed to respond, what resources have been available to them, how adequately have they functioned, what are the gaps, what are the needs, etc. We know that VT is a unique agricultural state in a number of ways: from our landscape and how weather plays out across it, to the diversity of farms here in terms of type and scale. The Agency of Agriculture's survey following the flooding in 2023 found that 70% of applicants were not covered by crop insurance; and we know that even farms which are covered by crop insurance are not being made whole or even having all of their losses addressed. We know that farmers need rapid relief, and that getting funds out quickly is important and easier to do at a local level with a state program. We are excited to be working on this project, and to share more about it as we move forward this session.

b. Vermont Cannabis Equity Coalition

- i. Over the last few years, we seen more than 250 new farmers (and these are just the outdoor producers) in one particular sector of VT's agricultural economy. But you wouldn't know it because these producers aren't considered farmers, the product they produce isn't considered agricultural, they can't produce on land in the VT land Trust, they can't produce on land which is part of an NRCS contract or on land the tenure of which is funded in any way by the federal government. They are audited multiple times a year by multiple entities and pay thousands of dollars for insurance and banking and basic administrative costs each year (we estimate an avg tier 1

producer spending at least \$15-20k / year for administrative work alone). Amidst these unreasonable burdens, they can't even sell their product directly to consumers, meaning they are mandated to immediately lose half of the value of what they produce to someone else who will capitalize on the value of their work.

- ii. The VT Cannabis Equity Coalition is: Rural VT, NOFA VT, VT Racial Justice Alliance, VT Growers' Association, Green Mtn. Patients' Alliance. Our Coalition has been advocating for a regulated cannabis community and economy in VT which is racially just, economically equitable, and agriculturally accessible since pre-regulated market times in VT. We are all member based, not for profit organizations representing stakeholders affected by VT cannabis regulation. We hope to be a resource for policymakers in relationship to cannabis policy, and connecting directly with constituents who are stakeholders.
- iii. This year we come having engaged in 3 separate legislatively convened working groups since the last session ended (outdoor siting and advertising, medical, and social equity). We have also continued to meet with our different communities, allied organizations, and the Cannabis Control Board to grow mutual understanding and support.
- iv. We have clear priorities including:
 1. Establishing ongoing funding, and expansion of, the Cannabis Business Development Fund to include a farm viability type apparatus for smaller tiers of cultivators and particular categories of licensee.
 2. Establish a proportion of the excise tax to reinvestment in communities (land access, housing access, public health, education, etc.); and we are finalizing this recommendation with the CCB and other actors. It is fairly standard for states to invest significant portions of its excise tax into a fund of this nature. These two items will - we believe - be recommended in the CCB's own Social Equity Subcommittee Report.

3. Striking language adopted last year allowing new municipal powers over outdoor cultivation (“cultivation districts” with pre-established maximum setbacks); continue to enumerate in law the status of agriculture for outdoor cultivation. VT had been a beacon nationally, and NY is now recognizing adult use cultivation as agricultural. This working group evaluated the data from municipalities gathered by the CCB, from producers, from subject matter experts - we see no evidence or substantial enough evidence to justify the actions taken legislatively last year
4. Direct Market access for tier 1 and 2 cultivators and tier 1 manufacturers. Allow “direct market” tiers to directly market particular manufactured products. Allow cultivators to sell seeds and living plants they grow directly to customers. Propagation License allowance of sales directly to the public. We know that small farms, and small farmers, cannot survive without direct sales and without direct relationships with their customers and communities. We don’t have a market which is saturated - we have a market which is bottlenecked and in which market power is highly centralized to retailers.
5. Public Consumption - currently in VT, you can only consume cannabis if you own the home or property you are consuming on. You need the renter’s permission otherwise, and there is no public consumption. This establishes a fundamentally inequitable - and potentially dangerous - environment, in which a market is established with legal mechanisms only protecting those with the most privilege among us, which is disproportionately particular demographics of people in VT and nationally. NY has passed public consumption law.
6. Medical program equity - I will not make time to speak to this priority right now as I am not as well versed in these recommendations as our other priorities.

c. Fair Share Campaign and Equitable Taxation

- i. This coalition proposes policy to increase taxes on personal annual income over \$500,000 by 3%. The proposal would raise over \$74 million each year in state tax revenue and would only affect the wealthiest 1% of Vermont taxpayers - bringing their tax burden more in line with that of most people in Vermont. Rural VT sees this as low hanging fruit for addressing economic equity and public resource needs in Vermont.

d. Pesticides:

- i. We are working with the Protect Our Pollinator Coalition and others to monitor and influence the follow up work to H.706 (the neonic transition bill from last session). We would like to ensure that the processes established for variances, for integrated pest management, and associated issues have integrity environmentally, agronomically, and logistically for the farming community.
- ii. We are also looking forward to continuing discussion on and implementation of Act 131 from last session - the PFAS consumer products bill - in which restricted and non-restricted use pesticides are explicitly named as products which much be assessed. We want to make sure that pesticides are not disincluded from this list as there is substantial evidence from independent testing pointing to PFAS contamination in pesticides.
- iii. Other:
 1. Supporting the needs of our migrant farmworker community in a time of increased threat.
 2. Supporting NOFA's request for base funding supporting its Crop Cash and Farm Share programs.
 - a. Finally, Farm Share subsidizes CSA shares for limited-income Vermonters by paying for 25-75% of the CSA cost.
 - b. Crop Cash doubles 3SquaresVT (SNAP) benefits for fruits and vegetables purchased at Vermont farmers markets, and now to beyond produce

3. Farm to School and Early Childhood Coalition, and we're supporting their request of level, base funding of \$500,000 for Farm to School / Early Childhood grants, as well as \$500,000 for the Local Foods Incentive Grants.
4. Beginning to do some organizing related to improving the cottage food laws in VT
5. The future of agricultural regulation in VT. This having to do with the petition to the EPA related to the RAPS and how we regulate water quality in VT, but also how ag is seen and regulated at the municipal level.