

[Vermont House Committee on Agriculture, Food Resiliency, & Forestry](#)

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Thank you Chair Durfee, Vice Chair Surprenant, & Committee Members for inviting us here today to provide you with an update on the Vermont Farm Show.

I am Theresa Snow, President of the Vermont Farm Show Board. I joined the Board in 2023, stepping into the President role in May of last year. Many of you may be familiar with me from my past work founding and directing the Vermont non-profit Salvation Farms. I am no longer involved with that organization but I do remain a friend and fan of Salvation Farms.

I am pleased to be accompanied by Dave Martin, VFS Board Treasurer, longtime member of the Board of the VFS. Dave owns and operates Settlement Farm in Underhill and serves on the Board of the Vermont Sheep & Goat Association.

OTHER VFS REPS IN THE ROOM?

I am really looking forward to answering your questions but first I'd like to provide the Committee with a little history and context.

Please keep in mind that there are others in Vermont who have a more intimate knowledge of the VFS history than I do... What I will share is my best attempt to summarize the evolution of the VFS.

- The VFS started in the 1930's providing a space for farmers to gather and for producer associations to hold their annual meetings
 - o Dairy, Potato, Maple – Commissioner of Ag
- As the Show evolved, a product competition became a big part of the gathering as did the trade show element featuring a wide variety of agricultural service providers
- As years went on the Show saw the number of exhibitors grow

- The Show started out in Burlington's Memorial Auditorium, taking a short pause during WWII and then moving to the Barre Auditorium - in 2012 the VFS moved its event to the Champlain Valley Exposition
- Contests like the Political Pull and then the Capitol Cook-off were added as was a "Consumers Night" farmers market
- It was in 1957 when the VFS was officially incorporated as a 501c5 organization
- Throughout much of the VFS history, the VAAFM provided staff to support the Farm Show's coordination and many other state Agency/Dept staff would step into help with set-up, oversight, and breakdown of the actual event; UVM Extension has always played a big support role as well
- The role of the VFS Board had been to provide the Agency staffer guidance, as the VFS Board seats were historically and are still today mostly filled by produce association representatives
- The VFS receives no state funding, all its income has been received through Show exhibitors
- One exception was a small VT State Fairs Grant of approx. \$2,500 accessible to the VFS annually only if the event was three days long and included a product competition
- The VFS has always been free for all to attend with producer association meeting spaces provided at no charge
- It was about 15 years ago when the staff support from the VAAFM was no longer available to coordinate the show and oversee the event itself
- At that time, the VFS Board chose to hire a contracted show manager who took over all coordination of the Show
- The VFS has never had staff and does not have staff today
- Due to the organization's corporate status, the VFS is unable to provide tax-deduction for donations it receives – this limits the organization's ability to raise money

The last Farm Show was held in January of 2020.

It is my understanding that there are several reasons why the event has not been held since then. They include:

- the contracted Show Manager announced that 2020 would be the last show they would coordinate
- Covid-19 pandemic impacted the Boards thinking about holding a mid-winter in person event – and while planning a 2022 January show, canceled that event one month before the event as covid cases began to spike
- Even before the pandemic, the Board and the VFS exhibitors were witnessing changes in attendance mirror the changes being witnessed in Vermont agriculture and within the supporting infrastructure for agriculture in the state
- The Board began to question if Vermont still needed and/or wanted a Farm Show, and struggled with deciding how to hold an appealing show that would keep the organization financially viable

In early 2024, the VFS leadership, having been without a Board President for a couple of years, proposed dissolving the organization. If that happened, Vermont would have no Farm Show or VFS organization.

I and a handful of other Board members proposed an alternative to dissolving the organization that included two key activities. This included:

- 1) a Statewide stakeholder engagement process to learn if Vermont wants the VFS to exist and what kind of show and/or other services it wants, and
- 2) what kind of organization should the VFS be so that it can be financially viable

The Board voted at its May 2024 Annual Meeting to approve these alternative actions and the Board's executive committee members moved forward with the charge to secure contracted expertise to help us with this work.

I am pleased to share that earlier this month we completed our stakeholder engagement and information gathering process. This process included 16 virtual focus groups, 5 in-person gatherings, an online survey, and one-on-one interviews. In total approx. 300 individuals participate in this process.

We are now moving into our organizational structure and governance assessment process.

With the information collected through both processes, and with the aid of our contractors, the VFS Board officers will present our findings and recommendations to the full Board of the VFS in May at its Annual Meeting.

It will be at that meeting that the full Board will decide if the VFS will continue – as an organization and an event.