

Good morning!

It's my pleasure to testify today as a member of the TAC team. I really appreciate the representation on the committee; I learn a new perspective every meeting. It is a special gathering of people and I am honored to be a part of this great envisioning before us. It's been extremely thoughtful and intentional.

I am on the committee representing farmers and landowners. A little about me: My husband and I farm on a conserved farm in Leicester. We purchased the farm in 2000 (two 23-year-olds with a dream) with the intention of selling the development rights as a way to fund a cheese enterprise which we did, and we launched blue ledge farm in 2002. Currently we have a herd of 175 goats and produce 60K lbs of cheese annually which we distribute across the northeast, and the nation via our website. We employ 10 people and support a small family farm cow dairy in Leicester, purchasing all of their milk. We are the only two dairy farms left in Leicester. We are also an Animal Welfare Approved farm and I have had the pleasure of speaking at several conferences about various profitable management practices which also encourage humane practices on farms. As a first-generation farm, this all has been only possible because of conservation funds fueling our dream.

Having gone through the conservation process I was happy to serve on both the VHBC Board previously, and now on the VLT board.

In the early 2000s we did an "Overlay Easement" and conserved our 50 acres of wetland. Together with our neighbors our wetland is I believe one of the largest contiguous wetlands in the northeast and is credited with saving the town of Middlebury from catastrophic flooding not once but TWICE (Irene and summer of 2023). This overlay easement was so simple to do because our land was already in conservation. We appreciated the flexibility to do this additional layer of conservation, which then allowed us to purchase the hay field across the street to continue farming, when the neighbor was threatening to put in an RV park (terrible idea!).

Rep Balint visited our farm in 2023 to witness the power of the wetland in flood prevention. I know first hand that the VLT considers the VT Conservation Design Maps heavily when prioritizing conservation projects.

Along side our ACT 59 30 by 30 goal is another 30 by 30 goal, established by New England Food Systems Planners Partnership, to raise 30% of the food consumed in New England, in New England. Vermont is obviously a huge player in achieving this goal and it goes without saying we need farms and not fewer, more. So thank you for your vision with Act 59 as a way to achieve many goals, not the least of which supporting farms to meet the goal of feeding each other. Thank you!

-Hannah Sessions

