

For Senate Ag 2.20.25

Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today. I am Heidi Krantz, former President of the Vermont Horse Council and the current Chair of the Equine Industry Committee.

VHC is the only statewide equine organization in VT that represents the equine industry with a mission of "promoting a thriving equine community in Vermont." We are a volunteer, member-supported organization. The EIC oversees the legislative work of the Council, working closely with our partners at the Vermont Farm Bureau.

As you can imagine, the last few years have been challenging for equine farm operators, just as it has been for others who make their living from the land. One additional challenge faced by many equine farmers is that they do not benefit from inclusion in Current Use or eligibility for other agricultural support programs because their farms do not consistently meet the definition of agriculture.

Equine businesses are essentially a value added agricultural product/service. The horses are the "raw material" for the product, and it is the management and care of them that is agricultural. The owner of the business is a farmer whose business model must include income from sources dependent on horses including sales, boarding, instruction, and other forms of recreational/tourism services.

While the product is recreational, the equine operations that provide these services manage and care for the horses necessary for these activities in the same way as all other livestock. The timeline for return on investment for a horse is much longer than for other livestock as horses take longer to mature physically to be used for the work they do. The horses require an average of 1 acre per animal for pasture and adequate space for the daily movement required for their health. In addition, these farms produce or purchase hay for feed. All of this supports the working, agricultural lands and scenic landscape so important to Vermont's overall economy.

Our current legislative efforts focus on inconsistencies in the treatment of equine farm operations. We are asking for inclusion of equine farm operations that are making more than 50% of their income from the equines in their care, for those equine operations that are, like other farmers, managing the land for the growth and health of livestock. The product may not be a traditional agricultural product, but like dairy, beef, wool producers, flower growers - these equine farms support the goals of the Current Use Program and the state to "encourage and assist the maintenance of Vermont's productive agricultural and forest land, prevent the accelerated conversion of these lands to more intensive use; to achieve more equitable taxation for undeveloped lands; to encourage and assist in the preservation and enhancement of Vermont's scenic natural resources." They are expected to meet the same Required Agricultural Practices and other regulations, but because they are excluded from Current Use they do not benefit from the same support to help them keep their acres of land open and productive.

We are here today, because we wanted your Committee to be aware of our efforts, and the progress we have made with the help of the Farm Bureau, House Ag Committee, the Vermont Law and Graduate School and staff of the Current Use Program and Agency of Agriculture.

Mindy Hinsdale will share information with you about her experience as an equine farmer in Vermont and her observations about the obstacles limiting their success as businesses and as stewards of the land.