

Senate Committee on Natural Resources and Energy

S.325 Testimony March 11, 2026

As Presented by Vermont Farm Bureau President, Mary White

I am here today on behalf of Vermont Farm Bureau members from across our state who are sharing their stories of the adverse impacts of Act 181 and the implications it will have on their livelihoods and businesses.

Vermont Farm Bureau is the state's oldest non-profit trade association of agricultural producers. We were founded by our grassroots, which still sets our policies and priorities today. It is through this grassroots policy development process and emphasis on every member's input that makes the Farm Bureau an integral part of shaping public policy.

Our members represent all 14 counties, from rural Vermonters, homesteaders, generational farmers, to those supporting local markets. Rural Vermonters are hard-working families who value environmental stewardship by living with the land, not on it. Our agricultural and rural heritage is who we are, and for many; it is all we are. Vermont is unique; no two farms are alike, every family has its own journey, and every piece of land has its own story. That's precisely why we must trust individuals to decide what's best for their own farm and land.

Vermont Agriculture is a fundamental part of our state's economy, landscape, and way of life.

While the current agriculture exemption in Act 250 remains, many parts of Vermont Agriculture will be negatively impacted by limitations outlined within Act 181. We are concerned with farmers retiring, farmers diversifying, new farmers starting, as well as the impact on the overall economic viability of rural Vermont.

Vermont farmers are business owners and employers. We understand the need for housing directly, as many provide on-farm housing for employees and many rely on local labor. Over the past 10 years, we have seen our local workforce disappear and a decrease in youthful interest for farm employment. All types of farms, from produce farms to even sugar makers, are now turning to the H2A Visa Program of Temporary Ag Workers. This program requires housing for employees. It is not feasible for farmers to transport farm workers from housing in town or condos in Montpelier. We need to support rural housing growth on farms for the economic viability of our agricultural workforce.

The average age of a Vermont farmer is just shy of 58 years old. Vermont preaches to encourage generations to stay or return to the farm, but then in turn, makes it harder. For many farmers, everything they have goes back into the land. They are self-employed, with no IRA. The land is their retirement, their largest asset, as is the right to choose what happens to their land, including how it transfers to the next generation.

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Jim from West Topsham shares his story, At 80 years old, Jim has given this state a lifetime of stewardship and service to others. He has raised sheep, fed neighbors, chaired meetings, and given foster children a home. His vision for his property is to leave it better than he found it for his children, so they too can build a home of their own, be good stewards of the land, and leave it on to the next generation. “Our wealth is our land. The land is remote, I fear that future use will be threatened by not being able to use the lands that are well over 800' from route 25.”

There are many stories like Jim's. Who will reimburse the landowner or their family for their regulatory loss of assets in developmental rights in market value? A farm appraisal calculates the best use of the property. Who will back the farmer's business when the bank depreciates the farms largest borrowing asset due to this regulatory change? These are stories of someone's livelihood, not just a piece of land.

Vermont has been a leader in the nationwide development of Agritourism. We encourage farmers to diversify, to be open to the public, to offer farm stays, on-farm dinners, and local events. In 2021, you passed Act 31, the Agritourism Limited Liability Law. What a great moment for Vermont Agriculture. Now, just 5 years later, we are telling farmers their potential growth in this market will be limited to their geographic location and will most likely trigger an Act 250 review. I think we can agree that Agritourism must start with a farm, not just a venue, but we must allow our farmers to diversify in this area. To share the Vermont experience with others, so that they too may want to put down roots and build a farm or home here in rural Vermont. We must support a dairy farmer with rising input costs and a fluctuating milk market who has a business plan to diversify for additional income through a farm stay.

Neill Ryan is a 3rd-generation Vermonter who owns 200 acres in Corinth and Orange. He and his wife raise Scottish Highland beef cattle, as Neill's grandparents did in Starksboro. The Ryans cannot make a living from beef cattle alone. Many other Vermonters feel this struggle as input costs rise, so they work full-time jobs or diversify. The Ryan's rely on Agritourism as part of their farm operation including farm stays, professional development, and workshops. Neill says “ Our farm is a place of beauty and meaning that people want to be part of. This land—slated for Tier 2 and Tier 3 restrictions—was Governor Deane C. Davis's boyhood farm. They see static categories—“forest blocks,” “habitat connectors”—drawn on screens. I see two hundred years of human stewardship creating the biodiverse mosaic of field and forest that defines

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Vermont.” The necessary diversification of their business helped sustain their way of life. They have nurtured life back in to a historic homestead that was long forgotten while contributing to our local food supply. Isn't this the Vermont we want to support growth, not limit?

Michelle's story as a “new Vermonter” who moved to Vermont to build a home and has developed a farm business that is still evolving, including maple sap, an orchard, and agritourism. Her dream of growing to include farm stays is gone with her parcel proposed for direct tier 3 mapping. She worries Act 181 will burden her ability to continue building the business and negatively impact the future value of the property she has greatly invested in.

Our local food movement is growing, right from these Tier 2 and Tier 3 areas. Our maple syrup industry is thriving, right in these “forest blocks and habitat connectors,” and agriculture happens above 2,500 feet. In response to food security and declining dairy farm numbers, the Vermont Legislature relaunched “An Act Relating to Agricultural Development.” This “led” to the most recent Roadmap to 2032, Food Security in Vermont. This calls for Vermont to increase sustainable economic development and create jobs in Vermont's food and farm sector while improving access to healthy local foods for all Vermonters. This movement is happening all across rural Vermont, producing food for our local communities and markets. The very implications within Act 181 hinder this growth as many of these stories start with a home.

The Ackermann's from Cabot share their story: Caitlin & Ian grew up in the hills of Cabot and watched many of their peers move out of state. They felt a deep connection to the land and were able to purchase their dream 150 acre property in their hometown. They built a home (much further than 800 feet from any town road) and lived minimally off the land as they started a sugaring operation and a family. Their business has grown to 18,000 taps and sells award-winning maple products across the country. Their land provides the opportunity for them both to farm full-time, along with a homestead that they someday hope to share with their 3 children who are 5th-generation Vermonters. This dream and business started with the home. Another story that would not have been possible within the new restrictions proposed.

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In rural Vermont, we measure land in acres, not feet. Take a drive, you will see many houses built well away from the road. The Road Rule exemption for farming and forestry use is necessary, but the road rule itself, it will cripple our rural communities and hinder growth where we need it to flourish. Hannah from Burke expresses extreme concern of the implications for “Towns like Newark, Granby, Averill, Maidstone, Glastenbury, and dozens of others across this state” that will not meet the Tier 1a or 1b requirements. She shares, “The exemption that is supposed to help rural communities is structurally inaccessible to the rural communities that need it most.

It is not just the smallest or most remote towns that fall through this gap. Burke — a growing, thriving, economically active community that people actively want to move to — does not yet have municipal water and sewer. Burke gets the full weight of a permitting system designed to discourage exactly the kind of organic, community-driven growth it represents.”

Rural Vermonters are not carving the landscape for housing developments. We are using common sense and environmental stewardship with the lay of the landscape to make sound decisions when building. The Act 250 process will increase costs for our rural landowners, and the criteria conditions are not an applicable review for the vast majority of individual landowner projects. The process will deter landowners from applying or purchasing property altogether, leading to concerns with the decrease in the value of privately owned land and sale competition. Rural Vermont has spoken; they will leave. Young families will leave. Rural businesses will leave. When we hear generational Vermont farmers who have committed everything they have to this land say, “If it wasn’t for the farm, we wouldn’t still be here,” we are not doing our job. They are not leaving because of the weather or market conditions, but because of the implications of the restrictions on their way of life this act implies.

The purpose and goals of impacts on agriculture as defined in Act 181 read:

“To encourage :

-Strategies to protect long-term viability of agricultural and forestlands while maintaining low overall density,

- The manufacture and marketing of value-added agricultural and forest products,

- The use of locally-grown food products,

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Vermont farmers and rural landowners are accomplishing these goals independently with the trust of their communities. If our goal is truly of environmental concern, we must trust the farmers who work this land to leave it better for the next generation as the generation before. We must listen to the people who work the land, those who inherit the economic outcomes of this act, to accomplish the true goal of strengthening our agricultural and forestry industries.

We have seen firsthand the confusion, frustration, and unclear proceedings this act has caused in our rural communities. Our local planning commissions are being asked questions from landowners that they cannot answer because the answers do not yet exist. We recognize the land use review boards' efforts, but they can only work within the legislation. We must know the direct and indirect implications this act will have on our rural communities before commencing the effective dates.

If anything, we need more time. More time to understand the full economic impact on rural Vermont and our Agriculture and Forestry sectors.

We support and we encourage a full Act extension of implementation until December 2027 or further.

In addition, we request an economic impact study on rural Vermont, continued engagement with rural landowners, and a landowner survey be conducted.

In closing, less prospective growth in rural areas will lessen our community's representation and promote the voice of concentrated growth in larger towns and cities. This is when we lose the voice of agriculture. We will lose the voice of the heart of Vermont if we force the hand of prioritizing larger developments over those that feed us.