



FOR THE WEEK ENDING JANUARY 28, 2022

VT AGENCY OF AGRICULTURE PRESENTS BUDGET

Staff from VAAFM stopped by the House Appropriations Committee this week to present their budget and justifications for increases requested. The Fair Stipend was level funded at \$110,000; the 2+2 FARM Scholarship is at \$217,000; Farm to Plate asked for \$135,000; Farm to School is hoping to receive \$171,875; and the Working Lands line was at \$1,000,000. There are changes to many of the lines within the budget, mostly due to the huge influx of federal funds and grants such as the Northeast Dairy Business Innovation Center (among others).

BILLS INTRODUCED

H.696 proposes to amend the definition of accessory on-farm business to add a new type of activity. It would add "on-farm restaurants" as an option for farms looking to add an accessory on-farm business to the property if, daily, the restaurant featured products produced on the farm. This would prohibit municipal bylaws from banning on-farm restaurants. (Introduced by Birong of Vergennes)

H.697 proposes to authorize enrollment of reserve forestland in the Use Value Appraisal Program as a new category of managed forestland where active growing and harvesting of forest crops would not be required. (Introduced by House Natural Resources Committee)

H.653 (formerly draft 22-0333) proposes to create a new category of management plans that would allow forested lands managed to increase carbon sequestration, carbon storage, or enhance wildlife biodiversity to qualify for the Use Value Appraisal program. (Introduced by Lefebvre of Newark)

FARM BUREAU TESTIMONY ON S.258 IN SENATE AG

Farm Bureau visited with members of the Senate Agriculture Committee this week on a variety of issues, including S.258; this bill proposes to require the Secretary of VAAFM

to evaluate the sufficiency of the RAPs to determine if the requirements and practices under the RAPs are adequate to address increased and foreseeable climate change-induced precipitation in a manner that protects soil resources and prevents harmful or inefficient runoff of nutrient pollution to State waters.

Our testimony requested a hold on this bill, due to the fact there is currently a proposed change to the RAPs (at VAAFV) in process as well as changes to wetlands and CAFOs (at DEC). We noted there was already ample confusion for farmers and adding another layer of changes and public hearings to the mix would make it even more difficult to understand. Senator Pearson, one of the sponsors, wondered whether the changes proposed in S.258 could be added to the current VAAFV iteration and would follow up on that thought. The committee seemed to understand our concerns; we'll keep you posted.

S.166 MARKUP AND VOTE POSTPONED UNTIL FEBRUARY 1

A new draft of S.166 (broadband cleanup) changed the focus from Rule 3.500 (utilities) to Rule 3.700 (broadband) and was up for markup and possible vote today.

Unfortunately, there was a mix-up on the agenda and Senator Sears has rescheduled discussion to next Tuesday. We are hopeful it will be voted out and move to Senate Finance at that time. Discussion with Senator Starr in Ag this week indicated he would not be pulling the bill into that committee unless necessary so that it could get to the House in a timely fashion.

H.466 ON TO SENATE

H.466 proposed to regulate surface water withdrawals and interbasin transfers of surface water in Vermont; it was voted out of House Natural with two dissensions (Smith and Terenzini) and a further amendment on the floor of the House added the exclusion of "constructed ponds or other impoundments that are used for irrigation or watering of livestock and that are not subject to the Vermont Water Quality Standards."

The amended bill passed third reading and is now in the Senate Natural Resources Committee.

ANOTHER PROPOSED CHANGE TO CURRENT USE

The discussion on authorizing enrollment of reserve forestland (previously referred to as forever wild forests) in the Use Value Appraisal Program made it out of House Natural Resources on an 8-3-0 vote and has gone to House Ways and Means to determine impact on the state budget. Commissioner Snyder from FP&R supported the change in language, which included adding this forestland would be managed "for the purpose of

attaining old forest values and functions in accordance with minimum acceptable standards for forest management and as approved by the Commissioner.”

H.626 CONTINUES TO DRAW DISCUSSION IN HOUSE AG

As introduced by Reps. Sheldon and Troiano, this bill would prohibit the use of neonicotinoid pesticides until the Ag Secretary adopts rules for the sale, use or application of same. If the Secretary fails to adopt the rules by July 1, 2024, the prohibition on the sale, use or application of neonicotinoid pesticides would become permanent. Since the effective date of this bill is July 1, 2022, that means farmers would not be allowed to use these pesticides and could put them at a severe disadvantage if they have already purchased seed, etc., that would require their use.

Another challenge is that the Vermont Pesticide Council was disbanded in legislation approved last year, and their work on pesticides was included in the Ag Innovation Center, which has its first meeting scheduled for early February. The timeline is a major concern to the Committee members, and they have continued to take testimony from witnesses with opposing viewpoints. This discussion will continue; if you would like to provide comments, please let Farm Bureau know at crkdbrks@aol.com.

H.566 AND H.581 – FORESTRY BILLS

Supporters and opponents of H.566 (development of a Vermont Forest Future Action Plan through VT Sustainable Jobs Fund) have lined up in House Agriculture over the past two weeks, offering opinions on the necessity for more planning as opposed to more immediate action (as presented in H.581 residing in House Natural.) Some Committee members feel the Action Plan is based on the Farm to Plate initiative which has developed a strategic plan for agriculture and the food system and could be helpful. Testimony from several forestry companies indicated no more planning is necessary, but action is needed to keep their businesses viable. Ellen Kahler, VT Sustainable Jobs Fund, suggested a change to the words “Vermont Forest Future Action Plan” to “Vermont Forest Future Strategic Road Map” to get past the semantics and also proposed the Committee take up several pieces of H.581 (without ownership of the bill) which could include changes to truck weights, definition of accessory on-farm business and even suggestions on how to change some Act 250 provisions.

Chair Partridge agreed on further discussion and hoped to speak with Chair Sheldon (House Natural Resources) for permission to take up certain portions of the bill for testimony and come up with action plans.

If you would like to testify on any portion of H.566 or H.581, please contact Farm Bureau at 802-426-3579 or crkdbrks@aol.com.

CLIMATE ACTION PLAN REVIEWED IN SENATE AGRICULTURE

Members of the Council who worked on the Plan last year spent another morning in Committee and presented further comments that agriculture – through their water quality efforts – seemed to be making good headway into greenhouse gas emission efforts through sequestration. Water quality programs such as cover crops, reduced or no-till, nutrient management plans, riparian buffers and crop rotation have all been noted to also benefit climate challenges, and that means the State of Vermont and other resources (NRCS, etc.) have made good investments in farms. Ryan Patch, VAAFM Agriculture Climate and Land Use Policy Manager, noted that agriculture emits and sequesters carbon from the same unit of land.

Commissioner Peter Walke, DEC, noted the tight timeline required to finish the report of the Climate Council, which did not necessarily lend itself to more intense public comment and the date of meeting the first reduction in greenhouse gas emissions – 2025 – is going to be a challenge. UVM is studying the agronomic practices for water quality to determine which may complement greenhouse gas emission issues.

Many thanks to members of the subcommittee who worked on agricultural issues, with a special shout-out to co-chair Abbie Corse who worked hard to bridge the gap between ag and non-ag individuals and remind them of the value of our industry.

HOUSE NATURAL TAKES UP H.606, BIODIVERSITY BILL

H.606 would require 30% of land in Vermont be conserved by 2030 and 50% by 2050; testimony from ANR Secretary Julie Moore and others said there is a coalition building to respond to what is actionable in this bill. Members of the forestry industry were not generally supportive of this language and would prefer moving H.581. There seems to be a concern that as the population of Vermont ages, privately-owned land will be sold for development as opposed to conservation and this bill could be part of a survivability strategy for land management. (Thanks to Jill at Morris Government Affairs).

Thanks again for supporting Vermont Farm Bureau – if there is something we've missed, please let us know!

From the team – Bridget, Jill, Gerry, Joe and Jackie

