

Vt. Investments Put Landscapes to Work

By Amy Shollenberger

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In a state that is mostly forests and farmland, the Working Lands Enterprise initiative helps landowners generate income while protecting open space and the environment.

By Amy Shollenberger



Three quarters of Vermont's land is forested. And 88,000 landowners are responsible for these woodlands. Twenty percent of Vermont's land is farmland.

Vermont is investing public money in programs that preserve the state's renowned farms and forests while also creating economic opportunity for landowners.

The results of the Working Lands Enterprise initiative are promising, according to testimony at two joint hearings of the state's House and Senate Agriculture and Economic Development committees held last month.

In the past year the initiative has awarded \$1 million in grants to projects that seek to return economic gain on forests and farms while preserving them as "working landscapes" – land that provides value for its economic, aesthetic and environmental qualities.

An estimated 45 new jobs have been created out of \$1 million in grants provided by the initiative, according to grantee reports. Grant recipients have seen their gross receipts increase by approximately \$145,000 each. Overall, 1000 new jobs have been created in the agriculture and food processing sectors since the start of 2011.

Forests and farms are central to the state's identity and culture. Vermont is 75% forested, and 88,000 landowners are responsible for this forest area. But for many, the economic reality of keeping this land undeveloped is a yearly struggle. The same is often true for farmland, which makes up 20% of the state's land. Development pressures and low commodity prices make farming in a hilly state a perennial challenge.

Although these challenges have been addressed for decades, in the past several years a focus on

statewide policies have started to create some real solutions. In 2009, the Vermont Legislature created the [Farm to Plate Investment Program](#). This idea was promoted by [Rural Vermont](#) and [Vermont Businesses for Social Responsibility](#). The partnership of these two groups in and of itself drew attention: A group fighting for economic justice for family farms partnering with a business organization was a new idea in Vermont at the time. The initial goals of the Farm to Plate program were to increase economic development in Vermont's food and farm sector, create jobs in the food and farm economy and improve access to healthy local foods.

Since then, the Farm to Plate Network has grown to a statewide presence, developed a roadmap for the state with regard to economic development for the food sector, and created a [food atlas](#) that maps all farm and food related enterprises in the state. The Farm to Plate Network is now being looked at as a model for other states to build their own local foods systems.

The Working Lands Enterprise initiative grew out of the [Council on the Future of Vermont](#), which was a project of the [Vermont Council on Rural Development](#). The Council on the Future of Vermont was a two-year project (2007-2009) that explored past studies and dialogues about Vermont's identity and engaged Vermonters in a conversation to determine how they identified themselves and what was most important to them. One of the findings was that Vermonters value their working landscape above anything else. Out of that work, the [Working Landscape Partnership](#) was formed, and that group began advocating for a state investment in economic development focused on Vermont's working landscape.

In 2012, the Working Landscape Partnership successfully advocated for a bill that formed the [Working Lands Enterprise Board](#) (WLEB) and Fund (WLEF), as well as approximately \$1 million to start the initiative. In 2013, an additional \$1.4 million was invested in the WLEF for a second year of grants. This year, the governor has recommended \$1.5 million for the WLEF in his budget proposal. The WLEB is made up of private sector members throughout the supply chains of agriculture and forestry, the Vermont Agency of Agriculture, Vermont Department of Forests, Parks & Recreation, Vermont Agency of Commerce and Community Development, Vermont Housing Conservation Board, Vermont Economic Development Authority and Vermont Sustainable Jobs Fund. A few of the goals for the board, outlined in the enabling legislation, include the following:

1. *Stimulate a concerted economic development effort on behalf of Vermont's agriculture and forest product sectors by systematically advancing entrepreneurship, business development, and job creation;*
2. *Increase the value of Vermont's raw and value-added products through the development of in-state and export markets;*
3. *Attract a new generation of entrepreneurs to Vermont's farm, food system, forest, and value-added chain by facilitating more affordable access to the working landscape; and*
4. *Increase the amount of state investment in working lands enterprises, particularly when it leverages private and philanthropic funds.*

During the hearings last month, the legislative committees heard that the Farm to Plate Network has built a strong foundation for economic development work in the farm and food sectors, identifying key areas for focused work, bringing together stakeholders from various sectors to solve problems, and providing technical assistance to growing businesses.

They also heard that the WLEB and WLEF have had a great first year. One big goal of the WLEB was to bring more attention to economic development in the forest products sector. Michael Snyder, Vermont commissioner of Forests, Parks, and Recreation, noted, "This initiative represents a historic shift and a re-emphasis on our forests." Others noted that simply adding the phrase "and forest products" throughout the initial legislation has changed the way the working landscape economy is viewed and has brought a new, creative focus to building a sustainable working lands economy.

"These investments are really paying off," said Lucy Leriche, Vermont's deputy secretary of

Commerce and Community Development. “It’s a success from every angle that I can think of looking at it.”

Carolyn Partridge, chairperson of the House Agriculture Committee, agreed.

“I think it’s one of the most exciting things going on in the entire state,” she said.

Amy Shollenberger is the owner of Action Circles, a firm that provides communications support for the Working Lands Coalition. The coalition advocates for strong investment in the Working Lands Enterprise Fund.