

**Vermont Conservation Strategy Initiative - Agriculture Working Group**  
**Meeting #1, December 5, 2023, 11 am – 12 pm**  
**Meeting Notes**

Notes taken by Isaac Bissell, VHCB

**1. WELCOME AND INTRODUCTIONS**

Co-chairs Stacy Cibula, VHCB Agricultural Director, and Ryan Patch, Vermont Agency of Agriculture, Climate and Land Use Policy Manager, introduced themselves. Zoraya Hightower, Managing Director for Nature for Justice, was also introduced as a consultant hired by VHCB to work on the implementation of ACT 59, and in this capacity will be attending the Agriculture Working group in order to provide broader context about the VCSI and other working groups.

Participants introduced themselves by name, pronouns, and affiliation in the group chat.

**2. Stacy provided an Overview of VCSI – See slides from 12-5-23.**

**3. Ryan Patch reviewed Act 59 in its entirety, with specific emphasis on the agriculture related questions that the group was tasked with answering – See slides from 12-5-23.**

Ryan emphasized that the language of the legislation leaves room for differences in interpretation.

Ryan noted that the group's primary task is developing criteria to determine the types of agricultural lands that will qualify as supporting and restoring biodiversity and therefore count towards the natural resources management area category. Ryan's slides highlight important language in the definitions section (Section 2801) of Act 59 that the group will need to grapple with as we work to determine what types of agricultural lands that are permanently protected from conversion will count towards the natural resources management area category.

**4. Discussion/Questions**

A participant noted that economics were only mentioned once in Ryan's presentation and a meeting attendee sought confirmation that this was an important aspect of keeping land managed.

Ryan and Stacy both agreed that economic viability is important.

A group attendee inquired about the scope of the group's work. They asked if the group is tasked with coming up with a list of types of agricultural lands that meet the definitions as outlined in the statute or are we looking beyond that to make recommendation about changes to the statute language based on gaps or insufficient definitions. Are we doing both?

Zoraya confirmed that the group's primary responsibility was to decide what counts towards the goals of Act 59 and what doesn't count when it comes to conserved agricultural lands. She noted that this was a very labor intensive process and that we only have a short window of time to make these decisions. She noted that if a group member is not being paid to participate as a

part of their job that there could be some level of compensation for participating. She also reiterated that there were many different ways to engage with the processes that have been initiated by Act 59. She mentioned another way to engage was by helping to organize a focus group where different types of stakeholders come together to provide feedback on Act 59 directly to Nature for Justice, who will compile that feedback for consideration as the Act 59 process moves forward.

Stacy confirmed that the primary task of the agricultural working group is to provide a recommendation as to what types of conserved agricultural lands count towards the goals of Act 59. Stacy proposed that the group meet every 2 weeks for 1.5 to two hours, likely meeting almost entirely on Zoom.

A participant stated that it was helpful to understand time commitment that is being asked and what a focus group member might do. They also asked what type of compensation might be available for those who are not participating as a part of their job.

Zoraya responded by distinguishing between focus groups and the Ag Working Group. A focus group would meet one or maybe two times and that work wouldn't begin until February. This would mean contributing at most a couple hours of time to provide feedback on Act 59. There will be a number of focus groups that will consist of different types of Act 59 stakeholders, for example folks working in agriculture. The Ag Working Group commitment is more considerable, likely 2 hours every other week in meetings plus additional time reviewing documents prior to each meeting. If you are not being compensated as a part of your employment, she noted that there are ongoing discussions about and what level of compensation that might be.

Trey Martin, VHCB Director of Conservation and Rural Community Development, reiterated that we are still working on an amount to be paid, and that \$50 dollars per day, which has been paid to some members of other working groups in the past, doesn't seem like enough. More information will come as we work through these details.

A participant noted that it is important to have all materials presented at the meeting available ahead of time. Additionally, the meeting schedule, hours requirements and agenda topics should be available. They noted that other organizations do community outreach and hoped that those outreach efforts would be combined.

A participant mentioned the Payment for Ecosystem Services and Soil Health working group that some meeting members participated in. They noted that this work resulted in a strong stance against the financialization of nature, and that the desire was to pay for these practices in a more community based or state based way. They wanted to bring this into the conversation up front rather than waiting until the end, which they stated had occurred in the PES/Soil Health Working Group. They noted issues with carbon credits and justice, and hoped that we would not need to rehash the issues that were already discussed in the PES/Soil Health Working Group.

Zoraya thanked the participant for this feedback and noted that the mandate provided to the Agriculture Working Group was relatively narrow, and encompassed only a small portion of the many questions that must be answered as a part of the Act 59 process. While the group was not formed with the intention of answering all of the questions posed in the legislation, it isn't to

say that the group won't touch on other aspects of the legislation where there is overlap. She noted that there was another working group focused on equity, and others focused on other portions of the legislation, in addition to an overarching science and policy working group, which is the group that created the various working groups, including the Ag Working Group. She offered to bring broader feedback about the legislation to the Science and Policy working group to make sure it isn't lost, but also encouraged the Ag Working Group to use their time to focus on the primary question, which is to decide what types of conserved agricultural land will and won't count towards the goals of Act 59. She also reiterated that there was an opportunity to organize a focus group and that a focus group could provide broader feedback on the legislation rather than focusing exclusively on the narrower mandates that have been provided to the working groups.

Stacy indicated that the Ag Working Group needs to be a core group of people who are interested in committing to be members and that it should be limited to one person per organization. She stated that there is a need to move as swiftly and effectively as we can and that if you are interested in being a member you can email her at [s.cibula@vhcb.org](mailto:s.cibula@vhcb.org).

Bob Zaino, Agency of Natural Resources Natural Community Ecologist and member of the Conservation Categories Working Group, noted that there was a significant overlap between the Conservation Categories Working Group and the Agriculture Working Group, and that there could be opportunity for a back and forth between these two groups.

A participant noted that there was an ongoing conversation in the chat that they wanted to uplift. They stated that there is usually a transparent and clear process for who is being selected for being on working groups. They understood that we are building the ship as we are going down the river, but would like to see as much transparency as possible. They stated that a lot of people were able to attend the meeting because the invitation was forwarded to them, and it was hard to get to the point where they got an invite. They noted that Ryan stated it was invite only and asked how we could make this more open to be sure that different communities could be represented. They also stated that in order for the Agriculture Working Group to function we need to know all of the other working groups, who is on them, what they do and when they meet. They reiterated it had been a real struggle to get to this meeting today.

Stacy thanked all participants for their feedback and noted that the hour meeting time was at its end. She restated that anyone interested in joining the working group should reach out to her directly. She noted that the timeline is still being worked out but the aim is to have meetings on Zoom every other week. She expressed appreciation for the level of engagement and interest, and looked forward to the work ahead.