



Vermont Conservation Strategy Initiative:
Agriculture Working Group
January 24, 2024

Agenda

11:00 – 11:10 – Introductions

11:10 – 11:50 – Survey Results & Discussion

11:50 – 12:00 – Break

12:00 – 12:35 – Break-out discussions

12:35 – 12:55 – Large group discussion on breakouts

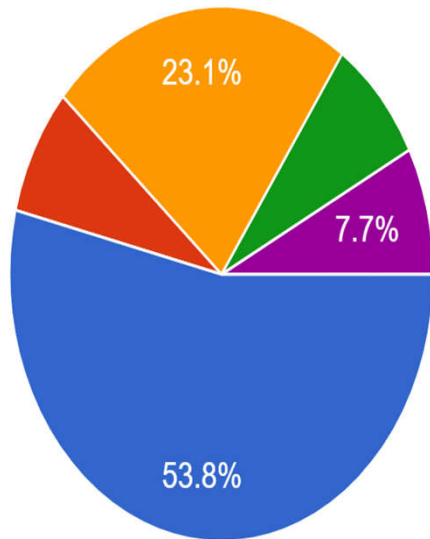
12:55 – 1:00 – Recap and next steps



Baseline Survey Results

1. Do you feel that agricultural easements permanently protect the majority of the conserved area from conversion, as defined by Act 59? ["Convers...natural form and function of ecosystem services."]

13 responses



● Yes

● No

● Unsure

● Agriculture has become a function of human habit required for survival, a serves as food for other animals that have adapted to that tract of land for t...

● I do, from "development" or hard infrastructure. But I think we need to acknowledge that a lot of land has alr...

Yes: 7

No: 1

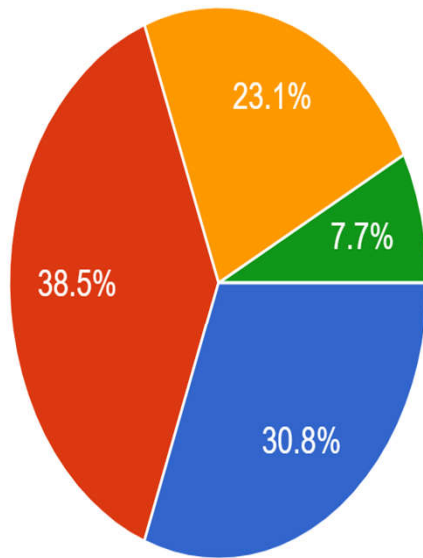
Unsure: 3

Comments: 2 (lean towards yes)

Baseline Survey Results

2. Do you feel that conserved agricultural lands ensure sustainable land management, as defined by Act 59? ["Sustainable land management" is define..., and that does not degrade ecosystem function.]

13 responses



● Yes

● No

● Unsure

● That's a lot of cake to have and eat too.
I think you can farm the best you can to meet that goal but have to also farm to make a living which can at times make that difficult. If agriculture is to be part of that social function it helps meet the definition.

Yes: 4

No: 5

Unsure: 3

Comments: 1

3. What other key topics or questions would you like to see us cover in the next meetings?

Policy Discussions	More Info Needed	Program Design
<p>Current use* (reforms to incentivize more enrollment, counting current CU enrolled land?)</p>	<p># of cons farms converted woods to fields</p>	<p>Parcel size (as criteria for enrollment?)</p>
<p>Conversion* – relationship to ag lands/biodiversity retention; interpretation of definition</p>	<p>Land use changes over time/%s of different land use categories. Current rates of loss & gain.</p>	<p>Metrics for L-T sustainable management & B-D goals.</p>
<p>What does 'supporting working farms' mean? (Act 59 vision)</p>	<p>Types of easements and land uses conserved?</p>	<p>Micro-units to meet 30x30 goals – Cons Districts or Reg Planning Commissions</p>
<p>How can work be done w/o imposing more regs on farmers?</p>	<p>Annual increases/decreases in acres in easements?</p>	
<p>Strict vs lean requirements/financial incentives?</p>	<p>Conservation practices required in CEs?</p>	
<p>Are easements flexible enough to meet changing needs of ag?</p>	<p>Overview of organic ag practices</p>	
	<p>Overview of Vermont Conservation Design</p>	
	<p>How are other states addressing Ag in 30x30?</p>	

4. How are you currently thinking about answering the question: "What criteria do you think should be used to determine the types of agricultural lands that will qualify?"

1. Parcel size
2. Absence from development satisfies this
3. Link current use with permanence
4. Ag may need a separate category that reflects nature of producing food as part of Vermont's conserved land matrix.



[CONTINUED] 4. How are you currently thinking about answering the question: "What criteria do you think should be used to determine the types of agricultural lands that will qualify?"

5. Land managed according to a Comprehensive Conservation Plan.

6. Those that maximize biodiversity and contribute to statewide diversity in ways that other lands do not.

7. All ag land that's permanently conserved with caveat that we explore & recommend incentives to transition these farms through NRCS Soil Management Systems.

8. All conserved ag land should qualify (x2)

9. Do the lands provide an ecological or social benefit that should be conserved?

10. Regenerative ag is aspirational – how do we define success? Should be flexible to accommodate movement towards goals.



5. Beyond the primary question of determining criteria which, if any, of the following questions should be addressed in the inventory report?

1. Existing agricultural conservation programs will be used to meet the conservation goals of Act 59? (85%)
2. New programs needed to meet the goals of Act 59? (77%)
3. What funding exists, and recommendations for new funding? (77%)
4. Opportunities exist for intergenerational farm transfers to achieve conservation? (77%)
5. Existing ag conservation practices, both permanent and intermediate, are available? (69%)



6. Where do you still have questions you'd like the Ag Working Group to explore?

1. Build upon conclusions of PES working group/say no to Act 59 being used as tool to commodify nature.
2. Would incorporating NRCS soil health principles into the RAPS be approach for moving all farmland to sustainable management goals?
3. What role could statewide land use planning and VT Cons Design play in setting priorities and identifying areas where conservation is needed to meet critical habitat goals?
4. How is conserved land monitored to ensure ecological and social benefits?



Baseline Survey - Key Takeaways

1. Over half the group feels that ag CE's permanently protect majority of area from conversion. (desire to explore conversion definition further.)
2. Mixed feelings on whether conserved ag lands ensure sustainable land mgt (39% no, 31% yes; 23% unsure)
3. Several stated that **all ag land** should count towards Act 59 goals.
4. Mention of other goals/benefits of farmland conservation beyond biodiversity (food security, social, rural economic).
5. Yearning for more information – stats, program overviews



Discussion Questions

1. There were differences in perspective on whether conserved agricultural lands permanently protect the majority of the area from conversion. Would anyone like to elaborate on their answer to this question?
2. There were differences in perspective on whether conserved agricultural lands ensure sustainable land management as defined by Act 59. Would anyone like to elaborate on their answer to this question?
3. At this moment, how are you feeling about agriculture being counted in the natural resources management category based on what you have learned about the definition of that category? Are you leaning towards trying to keep it in the category or look into creating a standalone category?
4. If you support having a standalone category for agricultural lands, do you think that all conserved agricultural lands should count towards the goals of Act 59?

Break Out Rooms

- Groups of 3 to 4.
- Each group has a facilitator; also need to designate note taker and reporter.
- Continuation of group discussion. Takeaways from the survey. What discussions do we need to have to move forward? Where do you see the biggest challenges and opportunities?

Act 59 Overview

Key Definitions

“Conversion” means a fundamental change in natural ecosystem type or habitat, natural or undeveloped land cover type, or natural form and function of aquatic systems.

“Sustainable land management”[referred to in natural resource management area category] means the stewardship and use of forests and forestlands, grasslands, wetlands, riparian areas, and other lands, **including the type of agricultural lands that support biodiversity**, in a way, at a rate, that maintains or restores their biodiversity, productivity, regeneration capacity, vitality, and their potential to fulfill, now and in the future, relevant ecological, economic, and social functions at local, State, and regional levels, and that does not degrade ecosystem function.

Act 59 Overview

Key Definitions

“Conserved” means permanently protected and meeting the definition of ecological reserve area, biodiversity conservation area, or natural resource management for purposes of **meeting 30% goal**.

For meeting 50% goal, “conserved” primarily means permanently protected and meeting the definition of 3 conservation categories, but can consider other **“long-term land protection mechanisms and measures that achieve the goals of VT Conservation Design that are enforceable and accountable and that support an ecologically functional and connected landscape.”**

Act 59 Overview

Current Conservation Categories



“Ecological reserve area” means an area having permanent protection from conversion and that is managed to maintain a natural state within which natural ecological processes and disturbance events are allowed to proceed with minimal interference.



“Biodiversity conservation area” means an area having permanent protection from conversion for the majority of the area and that is managed for the primary goal of sustaining species or habitats. These areas may include regular, active interventions to address the needs of particular species or to maintain or restore habitats.



“Natural resource management area” means an area having permanent protection from conversion for the majority of the area but that is subject to long-term, sustainable land management.