

# VERMONT HOUSING & CONSERVATION BOARD

## Vermont Farm & Forest Viability Program

*Viability Program Advisory Board Meeting*

*Meeting held by phone due to COVID-19*

June 19, 2020

### MINUTES

**Advisory Board members present:** Deputy Secretary Alyson Eastman (chair), Colleen Goodridge, Sarah Isham, Joan Goldstein (11:12AM), Chuck Ross, Gus Seelig

**VHCB staff present:** Ela Chapin, Katie Michels, Mariah Noth

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At 11:04AM, Deputy Sec. Alyson Eastman called the meeting to order.

At 11:05AM, Deputy Sec. Alyson Eastman provided a summary of the COVID relief proposals moving through the Vermont legislature, including \$30M proposed for dairy farmers for covid-relief, \$5M for non-dairy ag businesses for relief, \$6M for working lands businesses, and \$5M for forest sector businesses.

At 11:12AM, Joan Goldstein entered the Meeting. Ela Chapin provided updates on staff capacity and transitions as Katie Michels will be moving on in August to attend graduate school. Ela also provided updates on COVID-response coaching services launched by the Viability Program and their expansion, financial resources, and VHCB activities to support and promote racial justice.

At 11:27AM, Mariah Noth provided data about the COVID-response coaching program, which serves all farm, food, & forest products in VT - free of cost. Through a team of consultants, the Viability Program has served 60+ working lands businesses with urgent needs related to COVID-19. The Viability Program is also collecting data on businesses served. As of 6/18: 47% are dairy farms (conventional and organic), 14% are diversified livestock and produce, 12% represent forest products businesses (logging, forestry, wood manufacturing, maple), and 6% are livestock. The most common services provided are financial/cash flow planning, navigating/applying for relief programs, navigating market shifts, and developing online/retail sales. Of those reporting, annual gross sales range from \$7,500 to \$3.3M, with an avg. of \$494k. FTEs range from .25 to 21, with an avg. of 3. Acreage ranges from .5 acres to 2,000, with an avg. of 315.

Regular Viability Program Service Providers are also providing COVID-response support to current, past, and new clients, supported in part by re-deployment of previously contracted Viability funds. Total clients served by service providers as of June 18<sup>th</sup> was ~60.

At 11:35AM, Katie Michels provided updates on the Viability Program's recent grant rounds and work coordinating the Food Hub Collaborative. This year approximately \$950k was awarded to 30 farms through two rounds of Water Quality grants, with this round demonstrating the highest demand yet for grants. Business Plan Implementation Grants were awarded to 10 businesses, totaling nearly \$53k. The

Food Hub Collaborative (FHC) is pivoting its work related to group sales strategy, holding cohort meetings to share information about shifting operations and maintaining capacity with increased demand for local food. The FHC is planning beyond emergency response and considering infrastructure needs and how demand may change. FHC also involved in the USDA Coronavirus Food Assistance Program – Farmers to Families Food Box Program, providing over 500k lbs of produce to families in need.

At 11:42AM, Deputy Sec. Alyson Eastman invited questions for staff. The group discussed the significant support and financial/business skills development needs across the working lands sector through this time of major transition.

At 11:55, Deputy Sec. Alyson Eastman, the Advisory Board, and staff shared deep thanks and gratitude to Chuck Ross who is completing his service as a member of the Advisory Board. Deep appreciation was also shared for Katie Michels, Viability Program Coordinator, who will be departing her role to attend graduate school.

Prior meeting's minutes were not approved at this meeting, and will instead be circulated for approval at the next meeting of the Advisory Board.

At 12:09PM, meeting was adjourned.

Minutes submitted by Mariah Noth.