

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE – January 11, 2012

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Photo and Video clip available here: <http://vtworkinglands.org/programs/policy-councils/working-landscape/news/12-01-11-press-conference>

Vermont Working Lands Enterprise Investment Bill Draws Support *Lawmakers and Advocates Stand Together for Vermont's Future*

MONTPELIER, VT – Several Vermont lawmakers and advocates announced the introduction of the Vermont Working Lands Enterprise Investment bill on Wednesday morning in the Vermont statehouse. After a presentation to the Rural Economic Development Caucus, representatives from the Vermont Working Lands Partnership, the Vermont Woodlands Association, the Vermont Natural Resources Council, and the Vermont Land Trust, as well as several Vermont lawmakers stood together in support of the bill. Paul Costello, Executive Director of the Vermont Council on Rural Development (VCRD), explained that the bill is the culmination of many years of research and thought by many groups. “Vermont is at a point where we can declare our leadership. Let’s raise the flag and say we will be a food systems leader,” Costello urged.

Former Vermont Secretary of Agriculture and Chair of the Vermont Working Landscape Partnership (a project of VCRD) Roger Allbee noted that working landscape industries have defined our state since it began. “This bill is a bold bill and it is insightful that the legislature is behind it. Now we have a bold plan and bold leaders to move it forward,” Allbee exclaimed.

The bill has been introduced in both the House (H.496) and the Senate (S.246). Lead sponsors Rep. Will Stevens (I-Shoreham) and Senator Sara Kittell (D-Franklin) both spoke in strong support of the initiative. Stevens noted, “This effort is an attempt to create, for the first time, a unified and coherent setting in which Vermont’s Cultural Landscape can be nurtured....And finally, it entrenches the agricultural and forest product sectors at the highest levels of state economic development planning.”

Senator Kittell added, “Real businesses are the reason we have a working landscape here in Vermont. We need to build on this strength. I look forward to our Senate Agriculture committee’s work on this bill.” The bill is also sponsored by Representatives Carolyn Branagan (R-Georgia), Tess Taylor (D-Barre), and Mollie Burke (P-Brattleboro) and Senators John Campbell (D-Windsor) and Vince Illuzzi (R/D – Essex/Orleans).

Vermont Woodlands Association President Put Blodgett lamented the fact that the “best logs in New England are sent north to be milled in Canada. We are exporting value-added jobs that we desperately need right in this state.” Blodgett noted that the way to keep the jobs here is to encourage value-added forest products enterprises in Vermont. “We need these jobs here, and this program is designed to stimulate and encourage value-added enterprise that will bring those jobs,” he explained.

Paul Costello summed up the need for the bill by saying, “The decisions we make condition the success of the entrepreneurs who are the leaders on the land. We need to encourage, inspire, and support their leadership and stewardship, as well as their business success.”

More information about the Working Lands Enterprise Investment bill can be found at www.vtworkinglands.org. Both the House and Senate Agriculture committees have testimony scheduled this week on the bill, and on Wednesday, January 18th, at 6:30 pm, there will be a public hearing on the initiative in Room 11 of the Vermont Statehouse.

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