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Working the land

Vermonters from one end of the state to the other, of all political persuasions and demographic groups, rank the vitality and beauty of Vermont's working landscape as one of their most important values.

This view emerged from wide-ranging, in-depth statewide discussions with hundreds of Vermonters carried out by the Vermont Council on Rural Development. Paul Costello, executive director of the council, said the discussions that he led around the state were the "largest systematic analysis" of the views of Vermonters ever undertaken and that the value of the working landscape emerged as a dominant priority for Vermonters.

Legislators are now considering a bill that would establish a program to serve the interests of the state's working landscape, helping to foster development of agricultural- and forestry-related enterprises through a new Working Lands Enterprise Board. The new program would seek to leverage new investments in rural enterprises with a fund of state money that would begin with an appropriation of \$3 million.

Finding \$3 million is a difficult task this year as the state seeks to resolve a lingering budget deficit, even as it continues its recovery from Tropical Storm Irene. The economy is improving, but resources remain scarce. There is widespread interest in the bill to strengthen the rural economy, but it is unclear whether that interest will translate into dollars invested.

The stars would seem to be well-aligned for the new program. The number of farms has declined by one-third in the last 10 years, according to Costello, and the wood products industry has declined by 40 percent, he said. At the same time, small farm enterprises have begun to proliferate. He said there were 7,000 farms in Vermont today, two-fifths of them with sales of less than \$2,500 a year. The number of farms with sales of over \$50,000 has shrunk.

The example of Hardwick holds out hope that new farm enterprises can form an economic nucleus for small towns and the surrounding countryside all across the state. Hardwick is the site of the Vermont Food Venture Center, a business incubator set up to serve farmers and food-related businesses in the Northeast Kingdom. It was established with a patchwork of grants from state and federal sources and with the enthusiastic support of the state's agriculture and commerce agencies, the U.S. Department of Agriculture and Sen. Patrick Leahy.

Land, according to Costello, is Vermont's "core asset." Yet urban or suburban sprawl has a way of eating up land and destroying the economic vitality of rural regions. Sprawl is "quiet and insidious," he said, and Vermont is at a "tipping point" that could end up tipping in a way that preserves or destroys Vermont's working landscape.

"Working landscape" is a phrase that marries two ideas that otherwise might be at war with each other. Vermont's landscape is acknowledged internationally as uniquely beautiful. Vermonters instinctively understand this and want to preserve it. Its beauty consists of its mix of woods and fields, mountains and valleys, compact villages and working farms. It is not untamed wilderness. It is nature and humanity together.

The unique landscape of Vermont cannot survive as a picture postcard or a museum piece. It only survives if life on and near the land is a working proposition. Fields don't stay open of their own accord. When a rural economy loses its vitality, fields get sold off for the undistinguished and unlovely spread of strip development or housing tracts. Or they grow up to brush, and the visual beauty of the state deteriorates.

Visual beauty is not a luxury. The state's economy depends on the appeal of the state to tourists from all over the world. The deterioration of the state's rural economy would begin a vicious cycle of decline affecting all sectors of the economy.

Gov. Peter Shumlin has made the renaissance of agriculture in Vermont one of the pillars of his program. He mentions it in all of his important speeches. He is talking about what is happening in Hardwick and what could happen all across the state.

But he has not weighed in yet on the \$3 million startup of the Working Lands Enterprise Board. That's because he and the Legislature have a difficult balancing act to achieve in putting a budget together this year. So far he has not yet been ready to commit on the farm renaissance that, at least in rhetoric, he has been championing.

It would seem that the money ought to be found somewhere. Investing in the prosperity of rural Vermont makes sense for the economy of the state — for the creation of jobs and the vitality of our small towns. And it is in accord with Vermonters' most cherished values.
