Workshop: Land Access and Affordability  

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Over the past decades, land values in Vermont have increased dramatically, making it more difficult for farmers to gain access to productive and affordable farmland. In response the Vermont’s Farmland Conservation Partners revised the farm configuration guidelines and added new restrictions in the standard farm easement which encourage the long-term affordability of conserved farm properties, most notably the Option to Purchase at Agricultural Value. In addition the Vermont Land Trust (VLT) has developed the Farmland Access Program.

Changes made to the farm easement program furthering affordability goal:

- Replaced the Right of First Refusal (ROFR) with an Option to Purchase at Agricultural Value (OPAV) which specifically addresses the concern of non-farm (“estate”) buyers out-bidding farmers for conserved farms. The Option allows holders of easement to intervene in any sale to a non-farmer (family members excepted). The co-holders of the easement have the option to purchase the farm at appraised agricultural value and then resell to farmer. The OPAV is a deterrent for farmers to market and sign a purchase and sale agreement with an “estate” buyer.

- Before 2004 farmsteads were almost always included in farm conservation projects in Vermont. We now carefully consider, case by case, whether including the farmstead promotes the long term agricultural use, viability, and future affordability of prospective conservation projects. Now over half of the projects exclude the farmstead.

- The location of future housing rights is carefully screened for the possibility that their placement will encourage the conversion of the farm to an “estate” property.

- Square footage size restrictions on new residences on conserved farms are encouraged.

As the primary stewardship entity for most of Vermont’s farm easements, VLT has always informally assisted in connecting farm seekers with conserved farms for sale. We are now in the process of developing better systems and focusing more staff time on facilitating farmer to farmer sales. VLT Farm Access Program:

- Focuses on buying and conserving with OPAV farmland desirable for diversified agriculture – good soils with the possibility of retail marketing.

- Then marketing the farm at an affordable price to qualified beginning farmers

- Assist beginning farmer in the process of developing a business plan and finding financing

- VLT has completed Farmland Access 10 project (some of these were dairy farms)