Vermont’s Farmland Conservation Program is very focused on keeping agriculture viable in the State and more specifically on conserved farm properties. Our goal is to conserve a critical mass of farmland so there will be a land base for a thriving agricultural business sector in Vermont into the future. The Vermont Land Trust (VLT) holds easement on over 700 parcels of farmland (170,000 acres) with no idle parcels and only four in low-use (hayed once a year) reported during the 2008 monitoring season. The criteria for selecting projects emphasizes the characteristics of the resource which are indicators of the likely long term commercial agriculture use of the land, in order of importance – soils (by far the most important), location, infrastructure, and resource management. The Vermont farm easement for the most part leaves the management of the land up to the individual farmers. In the past twenty years Vermont farmers have become more and more comfortable with the conservation easement document, so when they are thinking of transferring the farm, building a barn, adding on land, or adding a new enterprise or family member to the business they now consider conservation as a possible way to fund and implement these changes. As one farmer said to me “My development rights are an asset that I do not plan to use (I want to farm this land – not build houses) so it makes sense to sell this asset and use the money to improve and expand my business making it more profitable”. Over a third of Vermont farm projects are transfers allowing the next generation of farmers to own a farm at an affordable price or to stabilize farm operations that are growing.

Besides completing 25-30 farm conservation projects a year, VLT has recently added a new initiative – The Farmland Access Program. The impetus for this initiative came from a VLT research project investigating the hurdles diversified farmers (defined here as all types of farmers but commodity milk dairy farmers) face getting into business in Vermont. Although there are many hurdles, marketing, transportation, lack of slaughter houses, financing structures, VLT saw that with our skill set in real estate transactions and close ties to the farm community we could be more pro-active finding and making available at an affordable price farm land for the next generation of commercial farmers (at least a $100,000 gross sales within five years). Each Farmland Access project is different, however the basic components are that VLT (with the possible financial backing of a conservation focused foundation or individual) gets a contract on a property, the funding for the conservation of the ag portion of property is acquired, and then the ag portion of the property is advertised at its agricultural value and resold to a farmer who is just stepping into first-time farm ownership (must have at least 3-5 years experience). The buyer selection process is competitive and based on a farm business plan which fits the farm resource and the buyer’s ability and experience to implement the plan. Beside grants to acquire a conserve easement on the property these properties are also made affordable by excluding areas for limited development, conserving and selling separately the non-ag land which was part of the initial seller’s property, and arranging some advantageous financing from charitable minded individuals and funds. With the Option to Purchase at Agricultural Value (see Alex Wylie’s other workshop write-up) as part of the VLT easement, the affordability of the farm will continue as the farm transfers in the future. As part of the Farmland Access Program VLT maintains a farm seeker database mostly for email updates about available farm properties. We have also realized that VLT could have more of a role in facilitating the sale of conserved farms and are now building systems for connecting farm seekers and conserved farm sellers.