Land Trusts, Ag Easements, Active Use, and Conservation

Vermont Land Trust
Alex Wylie – Agricultural Director
June 10, 2009 – Changing Lands, Changing Hands
Conserved Farmland in Vermont

- 808 farm parcels – 180,617 acres conserved

- All conserved farmland parcels were in active agricultural use when monitored in 2008 (donated easements not included in this statistic)

- Most easements co-held by Vermont Agency of Agriculture, Vermont Housing and Conservation Board, and Vermont Land Trust or Upper Valley Land Trust

- Funding from Federal, State, and private sources. All State dollars are matched at least 1 to 1, usually more.
FARMLAND SELECTION PRIORITYs

Active Farm Operation

Soils, Soils, Soils  Location
Infrastructure Management
SOILS

Quality - Prime & Statewide

Size, Configuration, Access

“Farmability”
LOCATION

Farm Community

Part of Farm Block

Conversion Impact to Other Farms
INFRASTRUCTURE & MANAGEMENT

Public Investments
Buildings in Good Condition
Sound Resource Management
Innovative Practices
Conservation and Farm Transfers

- Farmers see conservation as a way to make farms affordable to the next generation of dairy farmers or to neighbors as they expand their farms.
- Keeping farms affordable and viable is an important part of the easement
  - Option to Purchase at Agricultural Value
  - Restrictions on location and size of new houses so farms do not appeal to “estate” type buyers
  - Allowance for other types of rural enterprises on farms
Simultaneous Conservation Transfers

Example 1: Retiring owners sell a conservation easement, proceeds used for retirement. Restricted land then sold to new farmer at a lower price.
Primary Reason Farmers Sold their Development Rights* -2000-2004
(These statistical trends have continued)

- Transfer of Ownership: 80
- Debt reduction: 71
- Purchase land: 38
- Infrastructure improvement: 22
- Other: 15

* 188 Farms. Some farmers gave two primary reasons.
Jacques Bourbeau and Family - Swanton
Farmers conserve to buy more land and build more infrastructure.
VLT’s Other Programs to Assist Transfers and New Farmers

- Monitor conserved properties every year. Help conserved farmers find buyers.
- Keep a database of farm seekers and email potential available properties for sale (conserved and unconserved)
- VLT Farmland Access Program – VLT buys properties, conserves, and resells to farmer at affordable price
Why VLT started 
Farmland Access Program

- Access to land is one of biggest hurdles facing beginning diversified farmers in VT
- VLT has real estate skills and staff in close touch with farm community
- VLT has contacts with individuals and foundations interested in supporting beginning farmers and land conservation
Farmland Access Program
Making Agricultural Land Affordable

- Conservation easement includes an Option to Purchase at Agricultural Value so farm is valued at it’s agricultural value
- Affordability Option will continue as farm transfers to next farmer in the future
- Often non-ag land excluded and sold separately and possibly for limited residential development
Farmland Access Program: Get the Land

- Find desirable farm properties that would not be likely to continue in ag as presently priced and configured
- VLT focuses on non-commodity dairy farms for this program, so mostly interested in prime soils
- Appraisal and initiate conservation grants
- If appropriate, find buyers for non-agricultural parts of farm
- Sign contract with seller - closing planned
Farmland Access Program: Find the Farmer Buyer

- Buyers – commercial farmers (plan to have $100,000 gross in 5 yrs), at least 3 years experience, good business plan
- Advertise widely and contact our list of farm seekers
- Open houses
- RFP
- Decision based on criteria – community input
- Sign contract with farmer
Farmland Access Program: Process

- Close with seller and then with farmer – sometimes assign our contract, so VLT not in chain of title
- Complete Conservation Easement purchase process – to qualify most conservation projects need farmer owner
- Each project has developed in its own unique way – creative flexibility is important
Farmland Access Buyers

Photos Caleb McKenna

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