Today on across the fence we continue our air vocational series of programs on Vermont’s working landscape. Since 2010 the working landscape partnership has facilitated policy discussions to keep our farms and forests economy’s vital. The partnership was spearheaded by the Vermont council on rural development and it now includes nearly 500 partners around the state. One of those partners is Jacques Couture of Westfield Jacques and his wife own and operate a 500 acre diversify farm. The family is part of a tradition of stewardship that has helped shape our working landscape. Good afternoon and thanks for joining us I’m Judy Simpson. Today's program is an encore of sorts. A few years ago and Jacques Couture lead across the fence through his fields barns and woods in recognition of his selection as Vermont dairy farm of the year. This afternoon we welcome Jake to the studio to discuss how things are changing and what it takes to keep productive land sustainable in addition to his diversify farm business Jake is an active community member well. His service ranges from Westfield select board to the Vermont maple sugar makers association and as I mentioned he is part of the Vermont working landscape council. You're busy thanks so much for taking time to join us today.

Jacques.: Thank you for having me.

Judy.: Let’s start by talking about you diversify farm business.

Jacques.: We have as you said a farming operation. We have dairy cows about 65 to 75 dairy cows. About 120 heads of cattle in all. We raise our young stock. A few beef cattle that we just started doing in the last few years as well. We have 7500 taps maple sugaring operation and all the maple syrup products we produce there. We're retail right of the farm through our farm store or on the UPS truck every day. We have a website that's been a real boom to our business. We also operate a bed and breakfast at our farm which we started about when our youngest child went to college. We have a good size farm house and we thought it would be fun to do.

Judy.: I want to talk about that in a little bit but if there's a typical day for you what's that like?

Jacques.: The day on the farm begins at 5:00 AM every day 365 days a year the cows get milked and again in the afternoon at 4:00. We spend about 6 hours a day with the cows seven days a week in the rest of the day is spent doing whenever the season happens to be. If it's summer we're harvesting hay crop. Winter we're doing some of his timber harvesting and firewood cutting that we need to do for the sugar house and heating our home operation. The rest of the year would be whenever as I said either spreading manure on our fields building fence whenever it takes.
Judy.: It seems like any one of those things can keep you busy fulltime how you keep up with that?

Jacques.: We have some very good employees. Two fulltime employees on the farm and a lady who works part time for us in the store if we need to leave. My wife and I and when the kids come to visit they join in too.

Judy.: What do you think has made the biggest difference economically on the farm for you? With all the things that you've been doing?

Jacques.: If I was to pick one thing I would say that when we became certified organic as a dairy in 2007 it brought more stability to our milk prices although the inputs are little higher there's a lot more documentation that has been a major boom to us and helped a lot.

Judy.: There's been a lot of renewed interest in buying local do you see that it standing to your farm as well? People interested in local products?

Jacques.: Yes very much as I mentioned we sell our maple products at the farm or through our web site which is still at the farm. We recently got our meat license this spring. We have our own label certified organic grass fed beef. Right now the only problem is as people hear about all the time it's difficult to get slaughterhouse space for processing but we're going to overcome that with better planning. There's definitely a high demand for locally produced food and especially wall we found is that people want to meet the farmer that produces what they buy. There's definitely an interest in that.

Judy.: Tell me a little bit about your bed and breakfast business because that goes hand in hand with what we're talking about.

Jacques.: When we started the bed and breakfast it was a sideline type of thing. It still is somewhat of a sideline we wouldn't be able to live on that but the component that came along with that which we didn't anticipate was the farm or the agricultural education that we're doing. We didn't decide to get into the AG education business but by golly were into it. When people come to visit they want to know what we're doing they want to see what we're doing. Many of them have never been close to a cow never been close to a maple tree to see the sap dripping. In many cases it's their first impression of agriculture and it's somewhat you might say quite an honor the one to give them their first impression of agriculture and we want to do right because you only have one chance of a first impression.

Judy.: You must have a lot of great stories from the people who have come through your home?

Jacques.: We hear so many questions that sometimes people feel like they're asking a silly question but they are really asking it because they want to know the answer. We try to give an honest answer and I think what we do speaks louder than the words that we use so they observe. Sometimes somebody will come in all give you a short example which we talked about a minute ago. There are a few people that had come in and this ladies comment was that those poor cows are tide by the neck with a chain.

Judy.: And that was your first impression walking into the barn.

Jacques.: That was your first impression walking into the barn and after spending 45 minutes with us and she even got to feed a calf with a bottle and saw how the animals interacting with us and we tell them that we raise all our cattle from baby calves and seeing how we take care of our animals are last impression in last comment when she left the barn was wow you really love your animals and take good care of them. It's pretty exhilarating to hear those kinds of things.
Judy.: You and your wife Pauline have six children and now eight grandchildren. Is there any interest in farming in that generation in the next generation?

Jacques.: They all have college degrees they all have careers outside of agriculture so for the time being nobody is jumping for the opportunity of trying to push us out and taking over. But you never know what the future's going to be. We have one daughter and her husband with two grandchildren that live in town. They have their own business but they help us out especially with the maple sugaring part of it. Who knows what the future will bring we'd like to farm for a few more years.

Judy.: You share with us a couple of pictures that I think underscore the traditions of the working landscape that are really important to you. Your grandchildren out in the fields on the farm.

Jacques.: Yes as I said our children like to come to the farm these are our grandchildren there in the garden with us our granddaughter and two grandsons. It's neat for them to see that food comes from the soil. They get their hands into it.

Judy.: How does it make you feel as someone who's done this all your life to see the sort of excitement as rediscovery?

Jacques.: The look on all of our faces in that picture gives you the answer is pretty nice.

Judy.: There's also this picture with your three grandsons.

Jacques.: Yes they love tractors.

Judy.: In the beginning of the program I mentioned your involvement with the Vermont working landscape council. Tell me a little bit about the council and what you do for them.

Jacques.: What I bring to the council as well as the other members is what we do it home basically. Some of us at council are in my case a dairy farmer maple syrup producer. There are people from the forest industry and people from other aspects of the working landscape in Vermont. I guess we bring what we do to it. We bring our thoughts we bring how we feel about how important the landscape is. It's what we do and how important what we do is two the landscape. So it's a partnership.

Judy.: Can you give me some examples of that? I know we talked about your dairy operation but it also includes woods.

Jacques.: Yes the landscape is part of everything we do year round. We need our forests to provide firewood to provide saw timber and beautiful trees for the wildlife habitat. We need our fields to feed our cows and all of that encompasses the landscape up but it also is a draw for the people who like to come to Vermont. I guess I like to see agriculture as one of the spokes and that wheel of the Vermont economy. I get a sense that there's more and more awareness of that so to put it in simple words I think the working landscape is an example of a growing knowledge that it's important to appreciate our landscape. Whether we're in the tourism business or in the agriculture force tree business.

Judy.: Let's talk about forestry for a minute because it is important. You talk about maintaining your fields and your crops it's really important to also maintain the forest. What kinds of things you do to practice good forestry?

Jacques.: In our maple sugaring operation for instance we can grow better trees by cutting wood. This sounds counterproductive maybe but it's really the truth. If you use a garden as an example most people can relate to that. If you don't thin those carrots and they're planted too thick you're going to get a bunch of little carrots and it is the same thing with the forest. It's a longer term proposition but we are now capping trees in our forest that are 12-14 inches in diameter that were
maybe the size of a soda can back in the seventies when we're thinning in those areas. So it's extremely important that we work with the forest to help it grow better. In at pine we have a lot of pine on our farm that responds really well to thinning. I'm not sure I think there's a slide is some point that will see today that shows a couple of pine trees that we took pictures of that have grown to be much higher quality because were in there doing some thinning. Some very careful thinning and harvesting without damaging the environment.

Judy.: As you have a plan for your dairy operation you have a business plan for other crop production and you also have a plan for the forest as well.

Jacques.: Exactly we have a professionally rain forest management plan that we use to maintain our forests which the forest management plan was basically putting down in writing what we've been doing for forty years.

Judy.: You mentioned working on the Internet and how that has helped can you give me an example of how that works for you as far as what you do on the web?

Jacques.: Our web site is listed with the Vermont maple sugar makers association for instance. We also get a lot a lynx because we are members of our local chambers state chamber and what have you. The website puts everybody on the front page so to speak. We talked about how people want to meet the people who produce the food they buy a few minutes ago. That example rings true to the web sites as well. We build relationships with customers and a long-term. It doesn't mean they will always buy from us but if they like the flavor of what they get from us and feel like it's a reasonable price though keep buying from us and that continues to grow every year.

Judy.: It's very personal to because you mentioned earlier that the one on one relationship with people have with the farm that produces their food is really important.

Jacques.: Absolutely that just keeps getting more evident as time goes on.

Judy.: You also have visitors that you encouraged to come to your farm as well?

Jacques.: Yes every Wednesday night during the ski season we have this partnership with jay peak ski area in Northern Vermont with a list activities and one of them is a visit to the dairy farm. Every Wednesday afternoon at 430 we get a group of people. Could be anywhere from 5 to 35 people that come to visit our farm. We talk about maple sugaring. We talk about dairying. We actually let them for the barn. During that time it's milking in feeding time so they get a firsthand look at what's going on.

Judy.: As you continue your operations working with the landscape council what you think are some of the most important themes to remember while you're doing this and while the council is doing their work as well?

Jacques.: I think it's a little difficult to say what's most important but I think the overarching comment that I would make is just the acknowledgement from all the segments of Vermont Partners per se that the landscape is extremely important part of the overall Vermont image Vermont economy so on and so forth. The idea that we're all working together for common goal to maintain that landscape is what makes me feel like I want to be part of this

Judy.: We talked about your personal economy but let's talk about your communities economy too and how that depends on working farms and working landscapes. Because as not just your business we're talking about other people that you depend on business as well.
Jacques.: I guess even locally we talk about our farm but we also have a CSA in town. Not we but there is a CSA in a town. We have quite a few people who are beginning to get more directly connected to the consumers in marketing their products. I don't know from addressing your question very well here.

Judy.: I mean there a lot of verbal affects from what a farm does and people who depend on economies from the farm.

Jacques.: Yes I might answer that also by saying that where there's a nucleus of farms it creates enough critical mass for the other businesses that service the farms to be able to make a living as well. Whether it's of that service or a machinery dealer or grain dealer and so on.

Judy.: For people who want to learn more about the action plan from the council's working landscape work they can find that on the website www.vtrural.org that's the website for the Vermont council on rural development and if you prefer you can call that number it's (802)-223-6091. Jacques thanks so much for joining us.

Jacques.: Thank you very much.

Judy.: That's our program for today I'm Judy Simpson we will see you again next time on across the fence.

Across the fence is brought to you as a public service by the University of Vermont extension and WCAX TV