Remarks of Secretary of Agriculture Roger Allbee
UVM Food Systems Symposium
November 1, 2010

The late U.S Senator Justin Morrill would be smiling today, I believe, as he envisioned just this….the Land Grant being fully committed to agriculture and food systems and the community…that was his legacy. “Where Agriculture, the foundation of all present and future prosperity…may look for troops and earnest friends….”

You will hear a lot today about what is being done and what needs to be done going forward relative to research and education and outreach…and I will not address these….my colleagues the Commissioner of Health and the Commissioner of Education and others will discuss these. However we must recognize that food systems and thus agriculture touch ALL disciplines within the University….health, food safety, engineering, biology, economics, business, history, transportation, mapping and GIS, anthropology, writing and English, foreign languages, plant and soil science and foods of animal origin, which are so important to the Vermont agriculture of today, to name but a few.

What I want to address is the need for high level leadership and collaboration…to better help develop and advocate direction for the University and State Government and others….the goal between us cannot be window dressing, nor sound bits…it has to be real and measurable and realistic…it has to be STRATEGIC at the State University as a Public Land Grant. I once asked someone how you influence change in state government and at the University….and the answer was “its either money coming in or money going out.” This has certainly been true in state government and I expect at the University as well. However, when this approach is taken it often lacks any overall strategy or vision. In my humble view, we lack an unified strategy and leadership at the State level on food systems too…as we have our entrenched silos…development policy, nutrition policy, environmental policy, educational policy, tourism and promotion do not have a unified approach to food systems and agriculture…we talk about it…we say how important these are…but there is a lack of overall strategy and connections and often commitments at the highest levels. Those kinds of efforts, to be successful, take compromise, or as highlighted here, COLLABORATION, something that is increasingly missing in virtually all aspects of public policy…..I have yet to hear our candidates for Governor and others for higher public office talk about these connections and food systems, even though we know that 97% of Vermonter’s want a working landscape.
So today and going forward is an opportunity...an opportunity for leadership...a time to take some risks...to chart some new courses of action with NEW COLLABORATION MODELS. The old models assured this collaboration with agriculture....the President of the College of Agriculture being a member of the original 1872 Board of Agriculture that established the Land Grant and the Experiment Station. The Board of Trustees of the College of Agriculture that were representative of agriculture and not filled by a legislative contest for these positions....an Experiment Station that was connected based on needs through a real on the ground advisory body as reported in it’s first report, “for scientific study and investigation and experiments for use and advice of the citizens of Vermont.”

I have been around perhaps too long...I have seen too many grand ideas fail due to the lack of commitment and effective leadership...and this cannot fail. As my friend Representative Will Stevens stated recently, Vermont is at a “tipping point’ on agriculture and food systems...it can go either way...and I believe he is right. Therefore, I call upon President Fogel, the Board of Trustees and the new Governor to create a high level inter-governal and University working group with private sector participation to jointly develop strategic priorities for food systems research and educational needs within the State of Vermont. This cannot be done for widow dressing, NOR FOR PERSONAL AGENDAS, nor for sound bites...but for clear and meaningful strategic direction and action. And it must be based on a commitment to COLLABORATION AND COMPROMISE. The University has made a very important statement in adopting the Food Systems Spire; now is the time to strategically and collaboratively move it forward with committed and invigorated leadership. It cannot fail—it must not fail—our economy, our culture, our future depends upon this new direction and action.

This is the opportunity for Vermont to embrace the concept of food systems---in pursuit of healthier people, the land, and local economies. We already have a very diverse and innovative agricultural community which is on the cutting edge of adopting new ideas and concepts from energy producing methane digesters on farms to fresh vegetables being sold direct to schools. Vermont farmers are at the forefront of this change and the University and State Government must be collaborating in their support through this food systems approach.