

1996 Vermonter Poll: Agricultural I.Q.

While Vermonters believe both that it is important to diversify Vermont's agricultural output and that the agricultural landscape is important to Vermont's tourism industry, many lack specific knowledge about the role that agriculture plays in the state's economy and landscape.

This statement is based on the results of the 1996 Vermonter Poll, an annual statewide public opinion poll conducted by The University of Vermont's Center for Rural Studies. Analysis of the poll's data reveals that over 96% of respondents said that they believe that the state's agricultural landscape is important or very important to the state tourism industry, and more than 90% said they believe it is important for the state to diversify its agricultural output.

However, questions that were designed to measure Vermonters' knowledge of issues surrounding the scope and types of agricultural activities in the state reveal that many Vermonters did not know the answers to questions about such issues.

For example, about 80% of the poll's respondents were unable to state correctly the percentage of land in Vermont that is in agricultural production. Only about 20% correctly said that about a fifth of the land is in agriculture. The most common (incorrect) answers were a tenth of the land (29% of responses) and a third (25%).

Table 1. "What percentage of land in agricultural production?"

Response	Percent
A tenth	29.0
A fifth	20.1
A third	24.5
Almost half	15.1
Don't know/refused	11.4
Total	100.0

Vermonters were even less likely to know the type of cheese that is produced in greatest quantity in the state. Nearly 87% answered incorrectly that cheddar is the most abundantly produced cheese. Only about 6% correctly said mozzarella. A handful of respondents also guessed pepperjack or parmesan.

Table 2. "What cheese is produced in the greatest quantity in VT?"

Response	Percent
Cheddar	86.9
Pepperjack	1.5
Mozzarella	6.4
Parmesan	0.7
Don't Know/Refused	4.5
Total	100.0

Respondents did better on the question asking about the percentage of the state workforce that is in agriculture and related fields. About 28% correctly said that about twenty percent of the workforce is in agriculture and related industries. However, the most common answer, almost ten percent of the workforce, which got 30% of responses, was incorrect. Also, 20% of respondents incorrectly stated that about thirty percent of the workforce is in agriculture.

Table 3. "What percent of the workforce is in agriculture and related industries?"

Response	Percent
About ten	30.4
About twenty	28.2
About thirty	20.0
About forty	8.8
Almost fifty	5.1
DK/Ref.	7.4
Total	100.0

Next, respondents were given the names of the 5 USDA food groups, and asked which of these groups ought to have the most daily servings. About a third (34%) of respondents correctly said that grains ought to have the most servings, but slightly more respondents (35%) incorrectly thought the answer was vegetables. Dairy was the third most common choice, followed by fruits and meats.

Table 4. "Which USDA Food group ought to have the most daily servings?"

Response	Percent
Vegetables	35.0
Grains	34.0
Meats	2.7
Fruits	7.1
Dairy	15.4
DK/Ref.	5.8
Total	100.0

The results of this poll have led groups such as the Agriculture In The Classroom (AITC) Consortium to recommend that education about agriculture be included in school curricula to a greater degree, especially as a hands-on way of teaching about science and nature. Such an emphasis upon agriculture in schools will, it is hoped, bring Vermonters' level of knowledge about agricultural issues up to par with their belief about its importance to the state's well-being.