



VERMONT DAIRY FARMER VOICES

Interviews with dairy farmers and advocates

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Summary.....	2
Setting the Table.....	5
Interview Methodology.....	9
Farmer Wisdom.....	12
Getting Traction.....	29
Conclusion.....	32



SUMMARY



SUMMARY

In 2019, leaders worked to forge a coalition consisting of dairy farmer-leaders and representatives from Vermont conservation and environmental organizations...

They came together to address the twin challenges of water quality degradation and a dairy economy in distress. The group developed rapport, together with the beginnings of a shared vision for Vermont's farm-and-environment future. But obstacles prevented the group from mobilizing as a coalition, namely, power dynamics--the NGO community has the greater political leverage to engineer policy change in Vermont; and an imbalance of risk--farmers have everything at stake in the water quality debates. Before pressing forward to tackle these obstacles, four concerned Vermonters committed themselves to developing a better understanding of leadership within the dairy community, obstacles that such leaders face, and how the dairy community could be better placed at the center of dairy economy and water quality policy, as well as systems development.

The "Farmers' Voices" project consisted of two dozen interviews conducted by Abbie Corse, an organic dairy farmer from Whitingham, John Roberts, a farmer from Cornwall and the director of the Champlain Valley Farmer Coalition, Ginny McGinn, Executive Director of the Center for Whole Communities, and Gil Livingston, former President of the Vermont Land Trust. Susannah McCandless from the Center for Whole Communities assisted with the interviews. Interviewees were selected with the advice of the project's farmer-advisers Marie Audet, Paul Doton, and Brian Kemp, and from farmers who participated in an earlier effort, the Vermont Dairy and Water Collaborative. In developing the interview roster, we worked hard to include broad geographic representation, a mix of dairy production types and scales, and an age-gender-race balance.

Interviews ranged from 60 to 90 minutes in length, and because of Covid concerns were conducted by phone. Each interview was organized around a series of open-ended questions focused on dairy leadership, the public's perspective of and relationship with dairy farmers, what farmers need to feel valued, power dynamics within the dairy community, and the practicality of alliances with the environmental community. Rather than focusing on ensuring empirical accuracy, interviews ranged broadly and organically.

The full Farmers' Voices report discusses the following questions in depth:

- Why is addressing systemic inequity and the resulting power dynamics important to farmers' human, economic and land stewardship success?
- What are the barriers to dairy farmers' aspirations in terms of leading whole lives?
- What would it take to assure the just and whole treatment of farmworkers in a fashion that fully honors their decisive role in milk production?
- How do we support emerging, working dairy farmer-leaders?
- How have dairy farmers established, and how can they perpetuate positive reputations and relationships with their local communities and Vermonters in general?
- Why is "unity" within the farming community important and how do we get there?
- Can farmers advance their goals in and through partnerships with environmental organizations?
- Why are economic challenges so preeminent for dairy farmers?

The report also offers tangible needs, ideas, and actions in 5 areas:

- Supporting emerging farmer-leaders.
- Establishing and maintaining positive community relationships.
- Forging collaboration across and within the dairy community.
- Steps toward effective relationships with environmental organizations.
- Addressing dairy's economic challenges.

Finally, we ended the report with a few overarching ideas and critical observations we heard from farmers that stayed with us long after the interviews were completed:

- Reflections on how farmers described their lives.
- How farmers feel they are perceived by Vermonters.
- Barriers and challenges described by the farmers we interviewed.
- Farmers' optimism about the future.

As we share the Farmers' Voices report, we welcome feedback from members of the dairy community that we did not reach: What is missing? What surprises you in this report? What did we get right? Where do you think we went astray? How might the ideas gathered here from dairy farmers be put to good use? Please contact any member of our team with your questions and ideas:

Abbie Corse:	abbie.corse@gmail.com
John Roberts:	john@champlainvalleyfarmercoalition.com
Ginny McGinn:	ginny@wholecommunities.org
Gil Livingston:	wglivingston3@gmail.com

SETTING THE TABLE



SETTING THE TABLE

“Action on behalf of life transforms. Because the relationship between self and the world is reciprocal, it is not a question of first getting enlightened or saved and then acting. As we work to heal the earth, the earth heals us.”

Robin Wall Kimmerer

In early March of 2020 a small, cross-sector steering committee of a fledgling Farm and Water Coalition that included Vermont dairy farmers and representatives from environmental and conservation nonprofits (NGOs) in the state were preparing to convene their peers. The plan for that meeting was to address the power dynamics that had been raised as a primary barrier to our effective collaboration. And then, COVID-19 hit, and we went into lockdown. The meeting was cancelled, and the already challenging conditions for Vermont dairy farmers worsened. In the wake of COVID 19 the priorities for farmer and NGO leaders turned to existential concerns and we paused our efforts. Before we share more about the power dynamics at play, it is important to understand a little bit about the work that brought us to this point.

Project History

Provoked by the twin crises of a dairy sector under extreme economic duress and degraded water quality, a group of citizens convened as the Vermont Dairy and Water Collaborative (VDWC). From May 2018 through April 2019, VDWC engaged in cross-sector learning about the dairy economy and water quality, articulated a vision for Vermont’s future, and issued a [“call to action”](#) accompanied by a set of 8 recommendations. VDWC brought together top economic, agricultural, environmental, policy, science, regulatory and community stakeholders.

Out of VDWC’s work Vermont residents convened to create a “Dairy and Water Coalition,” consisting of dairy leaders and leaders of Vermont environmental and conservation NGOs. We hoped to articulate shared goals and pursue the identified strategies focused on the intersection of water quality and sustaining Vermont’s dairy sector. The latter effort was founded on a few beliefs: dairy farmers *are* environmentalists and NGO environmental leaders highly value our rural agricultural economy; the two communities have shared values and objectives; insufficient progress with respect to water quality and the dairy economy will be made within existing leadership systems; and a “Farm and Water Coalition” could mobilize the broad base of support required to effectuate fundamental system change.

Over the course of six months in convening this emerging coalition, we learned:

- The ultimate formation of a “farm-and-water coalition” could be powerful, both in terms of bringing about change, and in developing relationships between members.
- While there was some shared agreement within the group on a vision for Vermont’s future at the intersection of farming and water quality, that agreement was not based on candid discussions about differences in experience, perspective, and power within the group, especially:
 - The group’s lack of clarity about and commitment to the importance of dairy in Vermont’s future.
 - An impasse over whether all could agree to an immediate end to the use of chemical inputs - herbicides and pesticides - especially with regard to well water impacts and food health and safety.
 - Uneven willingness to address equity/justice within the Vermont agricultural system, including fair treatment of farm labor.
- Non-profit members need to do a good deal of additional learning about dairy farming in Vermont, both the economic context and the lived experiences of farmers, as well as the extent and impact of existing farm-based conservation practices. Farmers could learn more about the non-profit members, a group that is far from monolithic: they have varied histories, missions, constituencies, and tactics.
- The group’s success is dependent on an authentic recognition of the power dynamic within the group. The dynamic we refer to is the reality that the farmer-members have far more at risk than NGOs, and the resulting need to employ group practices and agreements that explicitly correct for this risk/power gap. Continuing to meet as a whole would be unproductive, if not destructive, until this risk/power dynamic is addressed.

Entrenched power dynamics were keeping this emerging group from trusting each other, and moving forward. What played out in the room is the predictable systemic inequity that makes it harder for some to participate than others, where some have the power to impact the daily lives and wellbeing of other members, with minimal impact to themselves, and where it takes more effort and cost for some to participate than others. There can be the illusion of a level playing field when we’ve succeeded in gathering around a table. And yet, NGO members are paid as much as 4- 5 times what a farmer may earn in a year, and where the conversation is theoretical problem- solving for them, it is existential for farmers. Because of these dynamics and our over-full stressed schedules, we rarely are able to take the time to effectively bring together those who have the most power to influence change and those who are most affected by those changes.

“Farming is a hard job, one that doesn’t pay in money. If someone told you, ‘Here’s the job description: \$500,000 down, 80 hours a week, full responsibility for everything. And if you have \$25,000 left over to pay for a car for a regular life, you’re doing pretty well—you’re bragging to your farmer friends.’ Who’s going to sign up?”

Policy and regulatory decisions at the legislative level impact the viability of dairy farms and the livelihoods of farm families. To share their experience and inform policy making, farmers must take precious time away from their already full workdays to focus attention on the government systems, to show up for unpaid or significantly underpaid positions with state agency task forces, while their NGO counterparts are paid to be in these rooms. We recognize that NGO leaders care about people and Vermont, and genuinely want to find common ground to advance their agendas. AND, what rarely happens in these rooms is a robust practice of centering the voices of those who will be most impacted by the changes proposed to improve water quality, fight climate change - fill in the blank.

Looking back over the last two years of conversations, beginning with the VDWC, continuing with the efforts to create a coalition of NGO and Dairy Farm leaders, what is clear is that there are pathways we can take that will support a healthy and vibrant future for Vermont dairy farmers, and also the steady improvement of water quality across the state. To do that, however, we must treat the crises faced by the dairy farmers of Vermont with the same attention and energy we give to advancing water quality and climate change initiatives.

INTERVIEW METHODOLOGY



INTERVIEW METHODOLOGY

Methodology

The conversations that have informed this report were facilitated by our Farmer Voice Team members, two who are farmers themselves, and two with deep roots in the environmental and community conservation movements. We developed our rationale and working list of farmers in late Fall of 2020, with guidance from farmer-members of the Dairy & Water Collaborative, members of Vermont's farmer-led watershed groups, and the relationships and connections of our team. We sought to include a broad range of dairy farm experience, from small to large farm operations, conventional to organic. We paid attention to regional representation, farming practices, intergenerational and new farming operations, and to differences in identity, race and gender.

The process of outreach and securing interviews spanned January through May. We ultimately spoke with 17 farmers across the state, and 8 representatives from organizations who expressly support and work with dairy farmers in Vermont.

Participants were asked to devote roughly an hour and a half of their time to these interviews and were offered compensation of \$100 each. We interviewed in teams in order to bring a breadth of perspective into the listening and synthesizing of the responses to our questions. During our interviews we provided a brief overview of the project, and then used the following questions as a guide to the conversation. Our objective was to use the questions as prompts - not to have each interviewee answer every question. Each interview was different, based on many factors and we prioritized hearing participants' responses, and giving time as needed to hear stories or go deeper on a particular topic.

From each of these interviews we surfaced key themes. We then doubled back to the farmer to ground truth our understanding of their ideas and analysis. What you will find in the Farmer Wisdom section is our synthesis of those themes.

This was not a formal social science research endeavor. We cannot claim empirical thoroughness or precision – nor was that the goal. Rather, we set out to listen to people who bring deep lived experience as farmers and those who work closely to support farmers. The VDWC from which this project arose centered the water crisis and the belief that dairy farming is an industry that has a role to play in solving our water quality issues. This Farmer Voices project seeks to center the voices and experiences of dairy farmers. As a result, our report includes some critiques, as it should, but also expresses aspirations for the future of dairy farming in Vermont.

QUESTION SET

Human Value & Dignity:

- What would you need to feel upheld and valued as a person engaged in the work of dairy farming?

Leadership:

- Where would you say leadership currently lies within the dairy community?
- Do you have a perspective about dairy leadership?
- What would you and other farmers need to have more impact/influence on the direction of the future of the dairy economy?
- Do you have any views about how dairy farmers might have a greater impact – on public policy, on public opinion, on our economy?
- What are the gaps or barriers that keep dairy farmers from securing effective water quality and economic policies-programs-resources?
- Could stronger leadership be built around the three farmer-led watershed organizations? What about key Caring Dairy participants?

Public Perspective and Relationships:

- What's your sense of the broader Vermont community's opinion about dairy farmers and dairy farming? Why is this?
- What are the barriers/reasons for the lack of general public understanding of dairy farms' positive contributions to our environment, culture and economy?

Potential for Environmental Alliances:

- What would dairy farmer-leaders need from those NGOs to build effective alliances? (What is now getting in the way? How could we build trust?)

Power Dynamics:

- Do you see a power dynamic at play within the dairy community? How about between the dairy community and its critics? Why is this?

FARMER WISDOM



FARMER WISDOM

The embodied wisdom of the farming community in Vermont is a powerful inspiration and resource for the future of our state. The purpose of these interviews has been to surface that knowledge, and to hear directly from farmers and organizations who work with them (NOFA, Vermont Farm Bureau, Rural VT, Migrant Justice, UVM Extension) about what they are experiencing and how they are responding during this time of socio-economic and environmental challenge. We have brought forward the themes that emerged across our conversations and acknowledge that we could not possibly reflect all that we heard here.

“Capitalism creates hierarchies that exert power from the top down. Only broad, grassroots organizing can impact this dynamic and leverage the real power that arises from farmers’ control over our food supply.”

Why is addressing systemic inequity and the resulting power dynamics important to farmers’ human, economic and land stewardship success?

Power dynamics have a strong but largely unrecognized impact on farmers’ relationships with their communities, with opinion leaders, with potential allies, and within the dairy sector itself. By “power dynamics” we mean both structural or systemic allocation of control and resources, but also the lenses, the assumptions and biases, farmers face in their day-to-day work and human relationships.

For example, farmers described occasions in which policy leaders paid close attention to academically credentialed soil scientists and water quality experts, but discounted or disregarded the life-long empirical experience of working farmers, and what they have learned through their use of a variety of strategies to increase soil fertility and reduce water quality degradation.

Further, while dairy farmers are often respected for their hard work, commitment to family, and agrarian ethic, their sophistication as skilled and creative businesspeople and land stewards is often left unrecognized. This empirical, place-based knowledge built through sustained relationships with the land--and the ecological and historical knowledge it creates is conveyed and held by multi-generational farm families. This form of knowledge and stewardship is not commonly honored by current systems.

Farmers need every ounce of that hard-won knowledge of place and conditions. Within the dairy economic system, farmers as producers often have little ability to control the availability and cost of inputs, or the volume of milk they supply, or the price they are paid. The many actors that exert influence on the dairy sector – government agencies, politicians, fluid milk buyers, dairy processors, and others -- relentlessly work to shift risk to farmers: risk associated with weather, oil prices, environmental compliance, consumer preferences and other volatile conditions. This risk-shifting hits Vermont family farms especially hard, given their smaller scale and Vermont’s modest milk production when compared to other regions of the country.

There is the potential that broad, grassroots organizing can impact this dynamic and leverage the authentic power that arises from farmers’ control over our food supply.

Scale and volume is power within the dairy community. From a young farmer perspective, access to the dairy sector requires a level of privilege: new milk contracts are not generally available, meaning that the path into dairy farming is highly restricted. Further, some farmers experience a “pecking order” within the dairy community itself, with large-scale, modern dairies at the top and small dairies focused on raw milk bottling at the bottom. Respect and influence is felt to diminish the smaller the scale of a dairy operation, to the point that despite being creative, economically successful businesses, small operations can be regarded as “hobby farms.”

Finally, another set of power dynamics occur within farm labor arrangements. Close to 40% of Vermont farms hire outside labor, and 50% of those laborers are from Mexico and Central America. There are no visas available for dairy work, housing depends on employment, and these farmworkers are policed by immigration officials when they leave farms, especially in Northern tier Vermont counties. The policing by border patrol in most of Vermont can make farmers reluctant to allow workers to leave farms, because they are fearful of losing their workers. This complicates workers’ ability to access basic needs including desirable food, medical care and community connection.

“Our root problem is how little Americans want to pay and expect to pay for food -- respect lies in what we are willing to pay. Fair food pricing is a ‘fair trade’ requirement.”

What are the barriers to dairy farmers’ aspirations in terms of leading whole lives?

Systemic inequalities are among the conditions that diminish dairy farmers' and farmworkers' ability to achieve personal, family and community aspirations. A feeling of powerlessness arises from milk price being controlled by the opaque and inequitable Federal milk order system. A variety of other factors also interfere:

- Difficulty meeting basic needs such as health care, childcare, or adequate housing.
- Especially with regard to animal welfare and environmental practices, some farmers feel attacked by their communities for being dairy farmers.
- With extensive investment and crippling debt associated with land, cattle, infrastructure and equipment, many farmers are struggling for a path to successfully transition farms.
- Carrying the weight of potentially being the generation to lose the farm and the relationship to land, community and place it holds.

In combination, these factors cause constant, high levels of stress that contribute to the divide within the farming community, and between farmers and other Vermonters.

“[I] want... less polarization between us producers and the consumers, less perspective of entitlement from those who visit or live in Vermont and practice so much more taking than giving back.”

One bright note is the mentoring, support and personal relationships farmers develop with each other through training, technical assistance, and improvement organizations such as the farmer-led watershed organizations, NOFA, Rural Vermont, the Dairy Grazing Apprenticeship Program and coop programs such as Organic Valley's "Generation O" or "Agri-Mark's Young Cooperators". But these opportunities seem more readily available in the diversified ag and fluid milk sectors, and less within the small-scale dairy community.

“People are not going to be able to care for land if they are not respected as human beings.”

What would it take to assure the just and whole treatment of farmworkers in a fashion that fully honors their decisive role in milk production?

The farmworkers and advocates to whom we spoke talked about the need for their hard work to be seen and respected. They mentioned several key needs to reduce barriers to full presence, dignity, and rights for farmworkers, particularly workers from Mexico and Central

America. These included reducing barriers to mobility, due to policing by Immigration and Customs Enforcement, and broader adoption of strong fair and impartial policing policies at the local and county level to address instances of ongoing collaboration between Vermont police and immigration enforcement for civil infractions. While interviewees supported immigration reform in concept, they did not support the currently proposed Farm Workforce Modernization Act. By tying workers' visas to particular employers, they pointed out, the Act would also enforce limits on workers' mobility.

Farmworkers and advocates with whom we spoke actively acknowledged the untenable current economic state of dairy farming--and extended what we had heard about the impacts on farmers to those on workers.

“Now the price of milk is low, but we do the same labor. The cost is passed on to us.” Like all parts of the dairy sector, they are working to create viable alternatives: “We are interested in alternatives to closing all the dairies.”

Farmworkers and advocates we interviewed highlighted the Milk with Dignity program as a working model, one which has returned over \$1 million to farms representing 20% of the state's dairy production in its first 2 years.” Under the program, a corporate milk buyer pays a per-hundredweight premium to participating farmers on milk produced according to a set of farmworker-authored labor standards. The program, which benefits US born as well as foreign-born workers, uses independent third party monitoring, and works with farmers to progressively meet all program conditions over time.

Notably, the third-party monitoring body, the Milk with Dignity Standards Council has partnered with farmers and Efficiency Vermont to leverage premiums received through the program to repair, upgrade and replace worker housing. The result is housing that better meets workers' needs, improving productivity and decreasing employee turnover. A 2021 assessment from the Vermont Housing and Conservation Board (<https://vhcb.org/sites/default/files/pdfs/pubs/Vermont-Farmworker-Housing-Needs-Assessment-Study-4-2021.pdf>) estimated the level of need, statewide for improvements and replacements to existing farmworker housing. The report's author highlighted the need for workers, who often share limited housing space across multiple shifts--to have access to quiet spaces to rest.

We are aware that some Vermont dairy farmers experience advocacy for farmworker rights as a personal attack and are unwilling to engage with activists. We also heard commonalities between farmers' and workers' desires: respect for hard work, and the possibility of fair payment for a quality product, to enable a dignified existence. Farmers and farmworkers both spoke of their commitment to active problem-solving and innovation to achieve those goals, and farmworkers and their allies have developed and implemented a model that they have shown can offer mutual economic benefit towards those ends. Finally, we learned that while many Vermont farm owners may fear being the generation to lose the farm, some farmworkers may have come to Vermont because their own families' farms, sitting even closer to the economic and environmental margins back home, had already become untenable.

Our stories are connected...

First interviewee: *I think we have to connect the dots - you know environmental issues are also human rights issues. We know that people who come here, many times, have been farming back home. And because of the pipelines, and the oil companies and all that, they have lost their crops. We hear so many stories, their crops don't grow anymore, and so they have only the option to work for the oil company, or go join the army, and they decide to migrate, because they don't want any of those. And we also hear people that have worked for the oil company, and they have suffered accidents or have lost loved ones in the big explosions that happen.*

Second interviewee: *That connects strongly to my story. I came from [the Mexican state of] Tabasco, which is oil country. The big companies have bought up land, have installed oil and gas wells, and pipelines... all over--through our lands. Then when we want to get it back... when I was a child, my parents grew watermelons. Then a really big Pemex pipeline went in that passed right through our land. At first people thought it was a positive development, because they [the oil company] paid: they paid a price, because it passed through our land. But over the years, the watermelons stopped growing--that's what my grandparents used to grow, what they produced. That was the work that they had, what supported our family--and it stopped being like that. Because the water was contaminated, the soil was contaminated, and what do they pay? It's like, they're doing this thing, and we didn't even have the right of access to our land. That's why my father immigrated here, why I came here. This story, it's all connected.*

The human factor, that's the main thing.

“Real leadership arises from those doing the work on the ground, in the community and not those simply making money on milk.”

How do we support emerging, working dairy farmer-leaders?

Our discussions focused on “leadership” in terms of where the impetus comes from, or should come from for sector-wide ideas, policies, advocacy, organizing, resources, promotion -- really any actions farmers and farmworkers identified as a priority need.

Many reflected on the reality that within the Vermont Statehouse, if not more broadly, dairy farmers have a greatly diminished voice. Gone are the days when many elected representatives were farmers, they now number in the handful. As one farmer reflected, “Dairy used to be in the ‘catbird seat’ and we have not adjusted to a subordinate position in the public’s view.”

Also, in years past, individual iconic farmer-leaders, often coop leaders, were the de facto leadership of the broader dairy community. Vermont dairy cooperatives have evolved away from directly serving and being led by local farmers to being larger, multi-state, product-driven entities. Cooperatives are no longer seen as the definitive voice for dairy farmers and there is now a lack of clear, sector-wide dairy leadership in Vermont. Many are uncertain about who the multiplicity of dairy-related organizations are representing and it is unclear to what extent they cooperate, communicate and coordinate with one another.

What ideas did farmers advance for investing in farmer leadership?

- Improved coordination and communication among dairy organizations.
 - A “council” composed of representatives of organizations like the Vermont Dairy Producers Alliance, Northeast Organic Farming Association, Vermont Farm Bureau, Rural Vermont and the farmer-led watershed organizations.
- Support leaders and leadership in places where they naturally arise.
 - For example, the three farmer-led watershed organizations are strong and growing. Reliable, flexible financial support to these watershed organizations would help.
- Encourage and support the emerging leadership of young farmers.
 - Farmers can all identify natural leaders [natural here points to leadership that happens outside of formal programs and structures, often unseen and unsupported but critical], especially young leaders, and support, encourage and promote them.
 - Actively connect more farmers to leadership and growth opportunities - focus on generational succession of leadership.
 - Intentional, organized young leadership development can be very successful, especially when farmer-to-farmer relationships are fostered. Organic Valley’s Gen O and other coops’ young farmer programs are good examples.

“We need to tell a different story that is beyond just romanticizing dairy.”

How have dairy farmers established, and how can they perpetuate positive reputations and relationships with their local communities and Vermonters in general?

A strong majority of Vermonters support local agriculture. Most farmers experience loyal support and good relationships with their neighbors and in their communities. These relationships have been forged through hard work and good intentions, and through creative approaches outlined below. The pandemic has increased support for local food, healthy food and dairy products.

In contrast, a small but creative and well-organized number of water quality advocates have labeled Vermont dairies as “polluters,” a label farmers feel is unfair. The science makes clear that less than 50% of Vermont’s phosphorus-related water quality challenges are linked to agriculture.

The origins of the farm-related phosphorus deposition are more than 70 years old. Present-day water quality degradation is less attributable to farmers’ current nutrient management and more connected to phosphorus stored in lake sediments. This current mindset around our water quality ignores the systemic realities under which farmers have existed. The introduction of pesticides, the aggressive use of phosphate fertilizer, the removal of hedgerows and many other agricultural practices, including certain market priorities were not put forward by the farmers themselves.

Instead, they were adopted by farmers as a way to keep farming. Farmers were directed by markets, milk processors, government agencies, universities, farm lenders, and technical assistance programs. These industry representatives encouraged farmers to adopt methods that we now understand to have been harmful. Vermont dairy farmers are now villainized for these farming practices, which are a result of these previous policies and priorities. This narrow perspective ignores the current reality that Vermont farmers set a high standard for the nation when it comes to an entire host of issues: soil health, water quality, environmental stewardship.

A small but vocal number of critics argue that “dairy is dead” and also express criticism on animal welfare grounds. There is an often-voiced opinion that most land-use alternatives to dairy farms would have less impact, such as residential development, fallow fields, or timber

management. Yet, as more climate data is presented, the ability of perennial grasslands in particular to sequester carbon, increase flood resilience, and provide habitat for a myriad of biodiversity is a factor that cannot be overlooked.

Aesthetics are a major public issue: one interviewee said, “Farmers are ambassadors for the dairy sector and visual messiness is a barrier.” Others noted the importance of accommodating the reasonable requests of neighbors, such as the timing of manure application. In some cases farmers forgo manure application altogether, impairing farmers’ ability to improve the health of soil and farm fields, fields that are prominent in the imagery we so lovingly associate with Vermont.

There is also a strong desire among a large segment of the public for the return of “traditional dairy farms” – small, picturesque, and ostensibly low-impact. The size and type of dairy operation can impact public perception and support: small, “trendy,” organic, scenic farms are “good” while large, modern, fluid milk operations are “bad.” This dichotomy fails to recognize the excellent land and nutrient management practices of many larger operations, and the poor practices of some small operations.

“Like many things, consumers' concern over the impact of dairy farms is justifiably related to our heightened environmental awareness, but is exacerbated by out-of-context social media sensationalism.”

Why this disconnect between public perception and present-day dairy farming? One factor may be that people have gradually lost a direct connection with cows: an increase in animal confinement, and a decrease in publicly visible animal grazing. Another factor may be that people do not understand natural systems, the complexity of soil health, historically effective sustainability practices, or modern land stewardship science. “Vermonters want farms, but they don’t want manure. A disconnection from the cycles of life causes a lack of understanding, unrealistic expectations and overly simplistic solutions.”

In addition, the public at large may not understand the complex and volatile economic forces that Vermont farmers must confront in producing milk.

Dairy farmers and farmer-led organizations employ now, or advocate for a variety of approaches to assuring continued public good will. As a critical amplifier of each of these strategies, farmers increasingly and creatively employ social media as an outreach, education and organizing tool.

Authentic, story-based outreach to Vermonters is especially important and effective, particularly using social media. As one farmer noted, “We need to tell a different story that is beyond just romanticizing dairy. We must describe farmers’ unrecognized contributions to Vermont communities.”

Especially following the pandemic, food security, the importance of a strong regional food system, and the role of dairy in a healthy and regionally sustainable diet at a time of statewide, and region-wide distress is a unifying theme around which community support can be built.

Vermont lacks a broadly accepted baseline measure of soil health, or the technology and systems to perform both baseline and periodic measuring of soil health on all Vermont farms. The lack of this essential data system leaves regulators, farmers and environmental advocates at odds about the quality of farmers’ soil stewardship, and the trajectory of soil change. Farmers firmly believe there is increasingly broad adoption by the dairy community of a matrix of soil enhancement strategies, and that Vermont outshines all other dairy states in this regard. But they lack the data to support this position.

Instead, the primary, tangible public measure of success is whether algae blooms appear in Lake Champlain - events that are more a product of legacy phosphorus, and less of present-day farm practices, and are made worse by lake temperature warming and certain weather conditions. While certainly lake water quality measurement is critical, farmers’ success in abating nutrient deposition is best measured by a focus on farm-specific soil health. And without such a measure, much more focus is trained on farm-related impacts, and less on the very substantial water quality degradation associated with stormwater runoff and sewage treatment facilities.

In short, the environmental benefits of farming, if they can be measured -- from soil health and retention to carbon sequestration and flood abatement and resilience, to habitat and riparian protection -- are a place where common ground is shared between farmers and the public, and even potentially environmentalist-critics. [Work on this topic is well underway both through the Agriculture and Ecosystems subcommittee of the Vermont Climate Council, and partnerships between the US Natural Resources Conservation Service, UVM’s Gund Institute and the Vermont Agency of Natural Resources and Agency of Agriculture.]

Hope for Dairy’s future lies in tangible connections with Vermonters and consumers. On- the-farm opportunities are critical to educating the public, especially recreational, learning, and food-focused opportunities. Examples include:

- “Breakfast on the Farm”:
 - <https://vermontbreakfastonthefarm.com/>
- “Farm to Fork” bicycle tours:
 - <https://www.farmtoforkfitness.com/vw5ft1clgfcvnbmu2385adup2xd3q>
- Shelburne Farms’ work with schools and educators:
 - <https://shelburnefarms.org/our-work/for-educators-and-schools>
- The Vermont Farm-to-School Network:
 - <https://vermontfarmtoschool.org/>
- Farms for City Kids provides a residential experience for inner city children from multicultural public schools throughout the northeast:
 - <https://farmsforcitykids.org/>
- Farm to Ballet:
 - <https://balletvermont.org/the-farm-to-ballet-project.html>

As more than one farmer pointed out, on-the-farm efforts require significant time and resources. Support and collaboration is required to enable working farmers to play a meaningful role in engaging the public. There are also many opportunities for allied organizations to supply the legwork required to successfully connect people with farms -- among others, NOFA Vermont, Rural Vermont, the Vermont Land Trust do this well.

Where possible, building direct relationships between consumers and farmers provides an opportunity for learning and to build a base of support. Many dairies make and sell dairy products from the farmstead, have developed a distinct place-based brand, and build life- long and community-wide relationships. Some examples:

- Blue Ledge Farm:
 - <https://blueledgefarm.com/>
- Richardson Family Farm:
 - <https://instagram.com/richardsonfamfarmer>
- Rebop Farm:
 - <https://instagram.com/rebopfarmvt/>
- Rock Bottom Farm - Strafford Organic Creamery:
 - https://www.instagram.com/strafford_creamery/
- Monument Farms:
 - <https://www.monumentfarms.com/>
- Bouchard Family Dairy:
 - <https://www.facebook.com/boucharddairy/>
- The Larson Farm:
 - <https://www.larsonfarmvt.com/>
- Miller Farm:
 - <https://www.vtmillerfarm.com/>

“Durable, large-scale dairy system change requires unity: within the dairy community, within the larger farming community, and unity among Vermonters around caring for and stewarding land. Unity does not mean conflict-free relationships; but unity does mean a level of trust sufficient to engage in hard conversations where disagreement arises.”

Why is “unity” within the farming community important and how do we get there?

Presently, the dairy community is fragmented along lines of scale, organic and non-organic production, grazing/grass-based and feed crop/corn, fluid milk and value-added, new farmers and multi-generational dairy families. Farmers’ investment in one another’s well-being must be built not on production/market type or scale, but on a comprehensive, integrated, non-siloed vision of Vermont agriculture. One major, current barrier to dairy “unification” is the lack of agreement about shared goals. As many farmers advocated:

- “All agriculture is good. Differentiating conventional from organic dairy farmers, and the dairy industry from diversified farming impedes support for a vibrant agricultural past and future in Vermont.”
- “Take away the farm labels that persist in separating and classifying farmers and focus on values instead.”
- “We need to actually find common ground: focus on how dairy farmers across the organic-conventional spectrum are alike and rely on existing cross-sector cohorts like watershed organizations.”
- “Focus on cross-cutting, widely accessible practices that could bring folks together.”
- “Land first, dairy second. Could we shift the dairy farm community’s focus to emphasizing land stewardship first, and dairy production second? “
- “Building community among farmers is critical, and we should focus on the interdependency of different agricultural sectors” and “celebrate the diversity of ag in Vermont without throwing anyone under the bus.”
- “If we cannot unify the farm community, we cannot solve the public perception/support issue.”
- “It is very important that existing organizations be much more coordinated. It is now confusing who speaks for and represents dairy farmers, and where to seek help.”

While the pending Governor’s Commission on the Future of Vermont Agriculture (<https://agriculture.vermont.gov/administration/governors-commission-future-vermont-agriculture/future-agriculture-commission>) is tasked to create a vision for agriculture, that

process is not farmer-led, and at the time of this report's writing, includes few working farmers "whose hands have touched the udders of cows," as one farmer put it.

Soil health measurement emerged again in our interviews, this time as a key tool to support unification. Adopting a clear soil health measure and documenting the current baseline across all Vermont farms would help tell the story of Vermont quality, could help unify all types of farmers, and also provide a platform for improvement

Tending the soil...

"Farmers are trying to maximize the output of land: they want to hold onto fertility, harvest high quality feed, keep as much as possible of the nutrients on the farm to support the next round. When I started out, there was 0.7% organic matter. Now there's 5-7% on most fields: that's what I manage for. At some point there's an upper limit, I think-- but I haven't got there yet.

If I can grow a few extra hundred pounds of grass per acre, that's a few cents in my pocket. It's also a level of pride. Watching things like stream health, the number of birds, deer, turkey you see... From an environmental impact perspective: we have one, because we exist; we try to minimize our impact, do well by the land, because then the environment is more resilient, more capable of carrying the impact of the herd. Fertility can be pollution if it's in the wrong place at the wrong time. If 1.5" rain falls the day after you spread manure, you've lost time, and energy you put into building that fertility: you've lost it all and polluted the brook. Nutrients leave the farm as milk; they have to come back from somewhere.

When someone comes to the farm to say, "you have to change this", it feels scary. It feels not generous on the part of the people implementing environmental policy. It says, "change this! We're not sure of the effect." There's no margin to try it. People--it feels like--haven't considered the impact on farmers. I live with the consequences of my actions every day--if the manure pit springs a leak, I live with it, because I smell it! I live with it.

Environmentalists are tilting at windmills, as if we already don't exist.

"Environmental leaders are focused on science but they need to understand the realities of farming. How can we give them a realistic experience on the farm? It is easier to blame the other - or what we don't know."

Can farmers' advance their goals in and through partnerships with environmental organizations?

As noted in “Context - Setting the Table,” above, this “Farmers Voices” effort arose from only partially successful early conversations between dairy farmer leaders and environmental/conservation organization leaders. In our conversations with farmers, we returned to the question of whether partnerships with the latter could be fruitful.

Speakers described seeing a class divide between environmental professionals and working farmers, a divide that can serve as a barrier to communication, understanding and collaboration. There is also the divide between working farmers who own the means of production, and the seasonal farmers, often from Mexico and Central America, who also tend to the soil, and deal with power dynamics, lack of livable wages and inequity. But in general, engaging in partnerships with environmental and conservation organizations is thought to be a good strategy for the dairy community. Environmental entities have risen to the top of the soil and water quality debate by employing excellent organizing and communication techniques and have developed a broad base of loyal membership support. While legislative and regulatory conflicts have arisen, the farm community, like the environmental sector, largely consists of people with an abiding commitment to excellent land stewardship.

However, several points of caution surfaced in our conversations. As noted in the opening of this section, a failure to be mindful of the power dynamics, or power divide within the farm community, and between the farm community and environmental leaders would be a grave error. In short, the environmental community has extensive access to financial resources, to policy leadership at all levels in Vermont, and through their grassroots networks and active use of social media, access to a broad base of support.

Preparedness is in order:

- “Environmental leaders need time on the farm, to live in farmers’ shoes. They are focused on science, but they need to understand the realities of farming. How can farmers give them a realistic experience on the farm? It’s easier to blame ‘the other’ - or blame what we don’t know. If environmentalists were willing to listen and not judge, I would be willing to host them on the farm.”
- “Can we have candid conversations between dairy and environmentalists: what do they most fear about each other? Are they willing to acknowledge their complicity [in the impacts of a cheap food system]?”
- “Environmentalists could benefit from some flexibility in thinking - their vision of a healthy environment is pretty sterile: as little human presence or human interaction as possible.”
- “Perhaps we could jointly pursue an urban-rural initiative that brought together dairy farmers working to improve their farm practices, with environmental activists in town who want to hold the city/town governments accountable for other pollution.”
- “We have to connect the dots - environmental issues are also human rights issues.”

“It’s not a living wage, it’s not enough to make a successful life’s path, financially. That’s something concerning as I get older. I have kids who are pretty much adults, trying to figure out what they want to do with their lives. They love where they came from, they have an interest in having something to do here but are very unsure financially whether it’s a good idea to consider being a dairy farmer. It’s a balancing act: making food that’s so good for so many people--but we (?) don’t account for our hours. It comes back to troubles in the milk price--but that’s just a piece of it, it’s more than that.”

Why are economic challenges so preeminent for dairy farmers?

Economic challenges, especially market order pricing unfairness and supply management, was a topic in nearly every conversation. While not a focus of our inquiry, economics at the farm level is of course relevant to all other topics: power dynamics, quality of life, leadership, farm community fragmentation, public sentiment, and relationships with environmental organizations.

Several themes emerged:

- Investment in dairy-specific infrastructure and production methods, and financial dependencies associated with those investments, make any dairy transition especially hard - both individual farm transitions and a reshaping of Vermont’s dairy sector writ large. As farmers described it, “People are capitalized into their existing systems, and they would need to be capitalized to extract themselves.”
- Farmers need access to more sound financial and business management programs: debt load is a very big issue.
- “Milk price pressures mean farmers can’t afford even a small risk to test new, potentially sustainable practices.”
- There is a disappointing lack of creativity in milk product marketing and new product innovation and development. Existing systems do not target dairy innovators, and raw milk producers are especially at a disadvantage.
- Because new milk contracts are not currently available, access to the existing commodity milk system is limited to existing farmers and existing farms. Further, there is little recognition or support for small-scale, alternative dairy models such as raw milk production. These conditions limit access for new and beginning farmers, reduce the potential for creativity and innovation in the dairy sector, and reinforce the top-down power dynamic discussed earlier.

On a positive note, several farmers emphasized economic opportunities:

Support standards programs with independent third-party monitoring that place a financial premium on high standards, increasing the return on sustainable and just practices. Milk with Dignity is a model for better compensation for farmers, as well as farmworkers. The program is valuable because it provides clear standards, independent 3rd party compliance review, and support for planning, resourcing, and completing improvements to housing and working conditions:

“People gain respect but are born with dignity. They take away your dignity when they make you invisible. When we talked about the Milk with Dignity campaign, it was making visible not only the need for the workers’ rights - but also that they were the leaders, coming with the solution: they were capable to do so.”

The pandemic was a major test that Vermont farmers largely passed by strengthening local aggregation and distribution systems, expanding local customer bases, and adjusting their business models.

Some farmers critique Vermont’s “over-regulation” of water quality, but the abundance and quality of our water sets Vermont apart. Farm management that protects water quality is also economically successful farming. Good environmental practices are also good economic practices.

Vermont has been much better at using the stick than offering the carrot – we should instead use incentives: incentivize the changes we want to see

Efficiency Vermont’s incentive-based, partnership model to improve outcomes and achieve desired change came up repeatedly as effective, and welcome on farms. Continue to create other, incentive-based measures, premiums and partnerships that reward farmers for desired changes in ways that are proportional to the risk and cost involved, making change accessible.

Finally, on a macro level, one farmer argued:

The dairy industry life cycle -- like those in other economic sectors -- leads to a process of consolidation, and then innovation and re-imagination. The question is HOW do we get through this time together?"

GETTING TRACTION



GETTING TRACTION

The embodied wisdom of the farming community in Vermont is a powerful inspiration and resource for the future of our state. The purpose of these interviews has been to surface that knowledge, and to hear directly from farmers and organizations who work with them (NOFA, Vermont Farm Bureau, Rural VT, Migrant Justice, UVM Extension) about what they are experiencing and how they are responding during this time of socio-economic and environmental challenge. We have brought forward the themes that emerged across our conversations and acknowledge that we could not possibly reflect all that we heard here.

This chapter pulls threads from “Farmers’ Wisdom” to identify tangible needs, ideas, actions. To a substantial degree, addressing farmers’ core challenges around leading whole lives and being free of systemic and relational power dynamics is dependent on success in the other 5 spheres.

Supporting emerging farmer-leaders:

- Identify mentor, support, and underwrite natural leaders emerging through existing collective action such as the farmer-led watershed organizations. Especially focus on the generational succession of leadership.
- Expand effective, structured mentoring and leadership training efforts modeled on Organic Valley’s “Generation O.” (Or the Dairy Grazing Apprenticeship.) or Agri-Mark’s young cooperatives? Which used to exist but I’m unclear as to its current iteration)
- Create a “council” or other informal but active vehicle to assure regular communication and, where possible, cooperation among farmer-led organizations in Vermont. (Also enhances connectivity goals, below.)

Positive Relationships with Communities and the Public:

- Expand authentic storytelling, especially through social media, describing the multiple contributions of farmers and farms to Vermont communities, culture, environment and economy.
- Build support around food security and the dairy’s critical role in our regional food system.
- Implement a broad-based soil health measuring and tracking system as an empirical basis to describe both farmers’ achievements to date and progress going forward. (Also enhances Unity, and Environmental Organization goals, below.)
- Continue and expand Vermonters’ direct connection to working dairies through educational, recreational, food-focused opportunities and, where possible, direct farm-consumer relationships.

- Coach and support farmers around public aesthetic impacts and through mediating neighbor demands.

Forge connection and collaboration across conventional to organic, small to large Dairy Farms and Farmers:

- Invest in the development of farmer-to-farmer organizing network across conventional and organic sectors (building on council idea above)
- Develop a farmer-driven vision for Vermont agriculture and specific goals to achieve that vision, then continue to unify the farm community around this vision and goals.
- Adopt the soil health measurement system (described above) as a primary tool for farmers to come together around land stewardship, and to describe for the public both current conditions and progress over time.
- Communicate much more about shared land stewardship values and actions, and less about polarizing distinctions of scale, product, or production model.

Healthy and Impactful Environmental Organization Relationships:

- Beginning with carefully chosen potential allies, invite on-the-farm learning by environmental and conservation leaders about agricultural practices, dairy business models, and farm-based environmental measures.
- Following learning, engage selected potential allies in a conversation about (1) Power and class dynamics between those allies and farmers; and (2) What do dairy farmers fear from the environmental community and vice versa? Can trust be built upon an explicit understanding of these dynamics?
- If sufficient trust is built, consider whether an important, impactful first collaboration might be the development and implementation of soil health measurement system (described above)
- Examine whether a consortium of the farmer-led watershed organizations might be the best vehicle for these discussions with environmental-conservation organizations.

Economic Challenges:

- Examine models for broad-based capitalizing of dairy farm transitions - to other dairy-related business models, and/or other types of agricultural production.
- Determine whether gaps exist in the availability of financial management training and technical assistance at all scales within the dairy sector and if so, close those gaps.
- Accelerate Vermont's investment in developing new dairy products and our creativity in marketing dairy products.
- Continue to advance design and implementation of systems that compensate for environmental services delivered by farms.

CONCLUSION



CONCLUSION

The authors of this report have been overwhelmed by the thoughtfulness, depth, intention, and nuance of each conversation. We have summarized those conversations extensively in “Farmer Wisdom” and distilled salient actions in “Getting Traction.” Here we view from a higher perspective: what overarching ideas, what critical observations stayed with us throughout this work?

Reflections on How Farmers Described Their Lives:

Farming is a complex, demanding, stressful, nuanced and satisfying business. Impacts on individual farmers are very personal, often dictated by a farm’s location in the state. There is no one “right” way to farm, meaning that each farmer’s approach is based on a farm’s physical attributes, and each farmer’s likes, preferences, and motivations. And as one farmer put it “‘Right’ is farming with respect for the environment, the soil, the animals, and the plants, let alone your family.” There is a sense of being alone with the elements, the soil, the animals and the “outsiders,” and yet there is a camaraderie of farming devotees. Farmers’ somewhat isolated existence compounds their disconnect from other Vermonters.

Farmers are the people who know the most about their land in Vermont, but they are under siege. We must find new ways to make visible the wisdom carried by farmers - other ways of knowing and relating to the land that farmers carry. Farmers are so inspiring and those of us who do not farm need to hear and uphold their stories as an equally important part of the solution to climate change, water quality, healthy food and food security. Farmers are critical to our survival - to Vermont being Vermont in many ways. How do we center farmers?

What does a just existence look like for dairy farmers and farm workers? Farming is a way of life - there are benefits as well as trade-offs. The trade-offs in previous generations were acceptable - for all kinds of reasons such as childcare, mutual aid, extended family, community support. Grandparents were able to die with dignity on the farm. The evolution of markets, machinery and technology mean that fewer people are necessary, but communities and families struggle to survive, and then suffer when a farm collapses.

How Farmers Feel They Are Perceived by Vermonters;

Some farmers referred to their sense from the public that there is a “wrong” way to farm and many outsiders and consumers are sure of that, though they would never farm themselves. Vermonters and visitors alike have a strong love and preference for “pretty, traditional, grazing” dairy farms, a preference that leaves aside the myriad nuances that exist when history, current reality, the economy and sound land stewardship are considered.

We need farmers and we know that we need farmers. But we don’t know how to go from the theoretical and romanticized perspective into actual practice. We lack an understanding of how integral farmers are to the health of our land and communities.

Well-meaning people don’t understand what it means to be a dairy farmer, and there is a disconnect around what would happen if dairy farmers disappear.

Barriers and Challenges Described by Farmers:

The dairy sector has a top-down, systemic power dynamic that squeezes producers of all scales and types. There is also a “class stigma” that attaches to dairy farmers in the public’s view. The polarization among conventional, organic, non-commodity and raw milk producers, cheesemakers, and fluid milk producers, and between large and small dairy farms is exacerbated by this power dynamic, the unending pressures of making a living, and not being supported in that effort by the community. Beyond policies and structures, we need to build community, connection, and respect across these divides.

How do we care for dairy farmers? The dairy market serves industry, not people. We lack broadly accepted and available farm-based climate data and soil health data that speak to the power of cows on grass. We are still capitalizing on the image of grazing cows while financial realities are making it more and more difficult for grass-based agriculture to happen. Tensions persist between theory and practice. How can we overcome reticence among farmers to change? Or are the majority of farmers willing but just unable to risk change - because of their history, their high debt load, the difficulty of adapting dairy-centric infrastructure and equipment, and other reasons?

“An agrarian economy rises up from the fields, woods and streams -- from the complex of soils, slopes, weathers, connections, influences and exchanges that we mean when we speak, for example, of the local community or the local watershed. The agrarian mind is therefore, not regional or national, let alone global, but local. It must know on intimate terms the local plants and animals and local spoils; it must know local possibilities and impossibilities, opportunities and hazards. It depends and insists on knowing very particular local histories and biographies.”

From “The Whole Horse,” by Wendell Berry.

Farmers’ Optimism About the Future:

Is there a potential for a just transition from dairy farming to land-and-climate stewardship - where dairy becomes an outcome and the farm’s purpose is to shepherd soil health in service of healthy food, clean water and climate change resilience? A soil health measurement system is key to telling the dairy story, documenting success, and measuring improvement. Food security and our regional food system are, in a post-pandemic world, rallying ideas to bring farmers and non- farmers together.

Who can lead the way to this very different future? There is an existing, large pool of young dairy leaders, with many different perspectives and histories. And there are many experienced dairy farmers with wisdom to share. These dairy leaders need intentional, systematic support for a just and vibrant future.

This report was compiled by the following farmer- and environmental nonprofit-listeners: Abbie Corse, Gil Livingston, John Roberts, and Ginny McGinn

Translation and copy-editing support from Susannah McCandless

Photos by Abbie Corse

2021

