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STRATEGIC PLAN FOR SUSTAINABLE AGRICULTURE IN VERMONT

University of Vermont Extension System

Submitted July 1995 to:
USDA Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education Program (SARE)

by Vern Grubinger, SARE State Coordinator
(Based on input from extension meetings,
and individual comments from extension personnel and farmers.)

Introduction:

Our challenge is to address short-term educational needs in agriculture while at the same time laying the groundwork for farms to be successful in the future. This strategic plan is intended to provide a framework to keep us on course so that our tactical plans dealing with just a few years will contribute to the fulfillment of our long-term goal of a vibrant agriculture in Vermont.

External Situation and Trends:

Vermont's agriculture is in jeopardy over the long haul. If left unchecked, the forces that are leading to fewer farms in Vermont will eventually make it impossible for a "critical mass" of people to farm profitably and happily in our state. We are at a crossroads in time where bold action by Extension and others may yet put Vermont on a path toward agricultural sustainability. Ignoring early warning signs and simply tinkering at the edges of our agricultural system is not likely to slow the ongoing decline in Vermont's farm numbers, farm families, and agricultural infrastructure.

The ramifications of a significant decline in Vermont's agriculture are awesome. Besides nearly half a billion dollars of products sold directly by Vermont farmers (NE Ag Stats '93), the so-called hidden benefits of farming are also significant. Our state's economy depends in large measure on an agrarian landscape that supports tourism, recreation, wildlife and the value-added advantage that the name "Vermont" has in the marketplace. Without a lot of farms on it, Vermont's working landscape will likely disappear into forests and shopping plazas.

Farms are also critical to maintaining the unique quality of life in Vermont. We are the most rural state in the nation, in terms of proportion of people living in small towns (Census '92). Vermonters cherish their small-town lifestyle, and agriculture facilitates the survival of small communities. It does this by providing a sense of tradition and place, by holding aside pressures that development places on town services, budgets, and the process of participatory rural democracy.

A strategic plan for sustaining agriculture requires a long-term view that looks ahead at least a generation. By anticipating the problems and opportunities over that time period, we can provide a sound footing for starting to address these challenges over the next few years. Extension will have to take risks and increase its role as an advocate for agriculture, educating the public and policy makers as to the consequences of inaction, and the steps required to turn this thing around. Otherwise, it's hard to imagine a positive future for the next generation of Vermont farmers.

Specific Problems and Opportunities:

Dairy comprises the majority of Vermont's agriculture. Due to forces largely beyond our control, the dairy industry is changing rapidly and the Northeast is increasingly at a competitive disadvantage. There is no realistic probability of federal or regional action via pricing to change this circumstance. A plan to address the fate of dairy farms is central to sustaining agriculture in Vermont.

In general, a shift to larger farms, value-added products, crop diversification and/or production techniques that substantially lower costs will be necessary for Vermont's typical family dairy farm to survive. Farms with 50 to 100 cows will be most pressured to get bigger, diversify, or use intensive grazing. Some of these farms will be able to make such adaptations, but many will not. As farms get bigger or turn to value added or low-input systems, we will see greater polarization of dairy farms as mid-sized farms in particular decline. Extension must help farmers acknowledge these realities, and make appropriate decisions sooner rather than later.

UVM Extension faculty with dairy expertise have projected that dairy farm numbers will decline by about one-third over the next decade (Oct.4, 1994 meeting). It is not unreasonable to assume that only half of our dairy farms, one thousand give or take, will adapt and remain viable over the next generation (20-30 years). The other thousand will either disappear into the non-working landscape, or be transformed into other enterprises (including other dairy farms) that maintain the well-being of people, land, natural resources and economic forces.

Our educational programs should be organized and developed so as to recognize varying potentials for continued success in dairying, and to promote appropriate options for successful transition (as discussed in part at the UVM Extension Cost Control meeting 10/93).

Without passively accepting the trend to fewer dairy farm numbers, we can admit the serious challenges to dairy farming, then act to promote success by helping farmers identify their goals and options, and facilitate their learning from each other.

STRATEGIC ACTIONS:

1) Help successful, high-potential dairy farms with:

- technical advice, management tools to reduce costs/cwt milk
- electronic delivery systems to get state-of-the-art info
- pro-active marketing options to cope with poor milk prices
- expansion necessary to gain sufficient economy of scale

2) Help farms with intermediate-potential to succeed in dairy to:

- diversify into more profitable products and/or crops
(value-added products; lumber, horticulture, compost, etc.
- share resources and/or management with nearby farms
- improve cost-control (ID/reduce unprofitable activities)
(transition to intensive pasture management if appropriate)

3) Help farms with low potential for success to:

- take corrective action (get out) before all equity is lost
- assess options for alternative employment and/or training
- cope with stress, find health insurance, maintain dignity

4) Help people put former dairy farms to productive use:

- meet educational needs of part-time/entry-level farmers
- address the needs of second-career "transplant" farmers
- facilitate farm placement/intern opportunities for youth
- help new producers ID unsaturated specialty crop niches
- link processors/markets to farmers to expand market niches

5) Help conserve unused farmland for agricultural/open space:

- catalog incentives a community can provide to new farmers
- facilitate leasing/co-ops/land trusts, donations etc.
- involve tourism industry in ag preservation programs

A variety of non-dairy livestock commodities have great potential as alternatives to dairy as far as ease of transition and effect on maintenance of open space. In fact, grass-based livestock agriculture (whether dairy or non-dairy) is perhaps the only realistic option for long-term sustainability of many farms due to Vermont's rolling landscape and the economic and natural resource costs of crop production.

Much of Vermont is well-suited to a grass-based agriculture that can produce beef, sheep and other grazing animals on varied soils and terrains. The use of fairly large fields and the natural recycling of nutrients that occurs with rotational grazing combine to support an aesthetically and environmentally-friendly working landscape.

For non-dairy livestock production to thrive, market demand and infrastructure must be developed. Vermont animal products must be produced to meet the expectations of quality-conscious consumers so that top dollar is obtained. Processing facilities must be established close by so that profits are not lost to transportation costs. And breeding practices must be aimed at development of the most appropriate genetics for Vermont's production and market conditions.

Pleasure horses may have an increasing role to in sustaining agriculture and open land. Many Vermonters with access to land are seeking recreation, not farm occupations. This industry creates a demand for high quality hay and a variety of services that support an agricultural infrastructure. Extension has not been actively involved in this area, and we need to become more involved.

STRATEGIC ACTIONS:

1) Work to increase demand for local livestock products:

- cooperate with VT Dept Ag., producer marketing efforts
- provide technical info for high quality production
- ID viable market niches: hormone-free, pasture-fed, etc

2) Support start-up operations to increase industry critical mass

- build on educational consortium of Ext, AnSci Dept, VT Dept. Ag., etc

- adapt and transfer dairy-based programs to other livestock

- work with producers to strengthen association activities

3) Plan for growth and profitability

- work to establish producer coops that retain profits

- work to establish local processing facilities

4) Expand non-dairy livestock role for Extension

- seek New England cooperation on guides, conferences, etc.

- work with AnSci Dept. on to expand pleasure horse programs

Horticulture is a rapidly growing segment of Vermont's agriculture, with production of ornamentals, vegetables, berries and greenhouse crops showing dramatic increases over the past 6 years (NE Ag Stats '93). However, the combined economic value of these commodities is still dwarfed by dairy, and the potential for continued growth is uncertain. Future expansion of this segment of agriculture must be tied to market analysis and development, including direct sales opportunities, value added and local institutional sales. Some areas, such as ornamentals, may continue to grow in sales based on home owner interests that do not affect sales of horticultural food crops.

Simply aiming to increase horticultural production is likely a recipe for disaster. Already, the brief boom in Vermont Christmas tree production, coupled with competition from Canada and increased sales of artificial trees has resulted in declining prices and profitability. Many horticultural producers are leery of continued expansion, and they perceive their markets to be nearly saturated.

Wholesaling horticultural products poses essentially the same obstacle to profitability that dairy is facing - the setting of prices by national and international forces beyond the control of local producers. Apple growers, highly dependent on wholesale markets that trade on a global scale, have experienced this problem perhaps more than other horticultural producers. The passage of various free-trade agreements is likely to render wholesale markets even less friendly to the small-scale, expensive production environment that characterizes Vermont.

STRATEGIC ACTIONS:

- Increase consumer demand for local products through advocacy

- Help producers identify retail opportunities vs. wholesale

- Use GIS, surveys, etc to ID unsaturated direct market locations
- Provide public policy education to facilitate institutional awareness and increased purchasing of local products
- Identify options for obtaining cost-effective labor
- Aggressively educate about non-chemical management options, and capitalize on this type of production in the marketplace
- Improve linkage between local production and specialty foods

Forest production overlaps with sustainable agriculture, given that lumber and maple syrup are an important part of diversification for many farms, if not their focus. Maple producers are in general well established, well organized and well-served by Extension. Their educational needs are shifting from production to marketing, food safety and even packaging issues.

Education around wood products and woodlot management has been a highly cooperative effort for Extension, given the large number of other resources in this area such as county foresters, consultants, and the UVM School of Natural Resources. The focus of future Extension efforts should be on areas of overlap with farming issues, such as analysis and education about options and ramifications of changes in the current use taxation program, and in management areas where other expertise is not available.

STRATEGIC ACTIONS:

- Provide conflict resolution education to help address resource management tensions between environmental groups and industry
- Capture more international markets
- Manage for long-term resource harvest

Besides commodity-oriented expertise and programming, there are a number of systems management tools that cut across all types of farming and are essential to sustaining agriculture. These include integrated pest management, soil stewardship, comprehensive decision making systems such as holistic resource management, water quality protection, and marketing techniques.

STRATEGIC ACTION:

- Extension personnel with expertise in specific agricultural systems tool(s) should develop educational programs that cut across commodities, building new skills in a wide range of agricultural producers, educators, agencies and industries.

In addition to production and natural resource-based systems approaches, it is increasingly recognized that social, political, policy and value-based systems must be addressed by extension as part of our sustainable agriculture effort. This means an increased role for all extension workers in addressing:

youth education, farm family issues, and community and policy decisions affecting agriculture, and consumer issues that affect how people perceive farming and food.

UVM dairy faculty recently (Oct 4, '94) recognized that a shift in some FTE assignments must be made if Extension is to be effective in "...developing leadership, communication, and public policy process skills of agricultural producers, families and supporting people in the infrastructure to enhance the understanding and appreciation of agriculture to public decision makers, and to the general public including youth"

STRATEGIC ACTIONS:

- Define appropriate agricultural advocacy role for extension
- Develop programs to build leadership/advocacy by producers
- Deliver policy-oriented programs to youth, consumers, etc
- Collect, format and disseminate supportive data about ag
- Include personal values in education that promotes local ag

Internal Strengths and Weaknesses:

UVM Extension is blessed with faculty and staff that are committed to enhancing the current and future well-being of agriculture in Vermont. Our people excel because they deliver technical information and training without losing sight of the fact that "a good extension worker is first and foremost someone who cares about, and works to address the needs, the hopes, the aspirations of PEOPLE" (John Ikerd, U. Missouri).

However, we are a low population state with funding levels that limit our number of extension faculty, and consequently our depth in terms of subject matter areas. As a result, we tend to have diverse demands, and many of us are spread too thin to adequately address the educational needs of emerging audiences and clientele.

We recognize that Extension's clientele are changing, and that we must adapt. Our "traditional" audiences are declining and others are growing in number and in potential impact on Vermont's agricultural future. This situation was described by participants at the May '94 sustainable agriculture retreat as follows:

Growing audiences include "non-traditional" producers of commodities such as beef, sheep, dairy goats, horses, aquaculture, ornamentals, vegetables, specialty/alternative crops, and organic products. In addition, a variety of non-farm audiences are on the increase, and warrant additional attention from Extension if we are to fulfill our mission of building broad-based support for agriculture. These include: gardeners, environmental groups, tourists, youth, and "transplanted" professionals coming to Vermont with training, capital and business experience. These last two groups probably deserve particular consideration in terms of impact on the future of agriculture. The first represents our future citizenry, and the second represents a small but active constituency with the resources, energy, and determination to help maintain the working landscape.

STRATEGIC ACTIONS:

- 1) Increase educational synergy by building on our networks.

Because of internal resources limitations, we will have to rely on cooperation and collaboration to meet the educational and informational needs of diverse audiences. We already have excellent networks in Vermont, and beyond, among producer groups, government agencies, academic institutions, and other Extension systems; these must be improved and expanded. The Center for Sustainable Agriculture will play a critical role in doing this by facilitating, and in some cases coordinating, the interaction of diverse groups around issues in which they share an interest.

- 2) Trade-off functions to build efficient educational networks.

As our networking expands, redundant functions must be acknowledged as soon as possible and traded between and among organizations in order to maintain efficiency. The New England Extension Consortium may provide a context for carrying some of this out, but other sharing of duties can be established within state, between and among organizations.

Among New England Land Grant universities and their extension systems, hard questions about efficiency and redundancy have yet to be answered. How many soil test labs, diagnostic labs, commodity newsletters, etc. do we need? With limited faculty positions, can various states specialize in certain subject areas? Extension should be ready to offer constructive suggestions to our Directors as they pursue this critical issue.

The Vermont Department of Agriculture, Food and Markets and the Agency of Natural Resources should be aggressively targeted for specific cooperative working agreements. They, too, have a diagnostic lab, a newsletter, conduct farm visits, and provide education to commodity groups. We must improve our working relationship with our sister agency, strengthening communication and formalizing trade-offs in responsibilities. Similar practical working agreements should be pursued with Vermont's Natural Resource Conservation Districts.

3) Develop closer funding and activity ties with producers.

Producer groups have increasingly been cooperators on efforts such as newsletter production, conference organization and other educational programs. We should further this relationship to include more funding for and participation in applied research and demonstration, farmer-to-farmer advising and public policy/leadership efforts. We must also increase our ability to collect and consider input from producers as we develop and implement educational programs

4) Use the information superhighway, without getting run over.

To keep up with information demands, Extension will have to greatly improve our ability and willingness to rapidly and easily access "non-traditional" information from around the nation and the globe. This will not be accomplished simply with additional technology, but more importantly with training on how to locate and scan various data bases, and a clear division of labor within the organization so that individuals can focus on keeping up with certain topics and not get buried alive with information.

5) Utilize alternative information and education tools (to take us beyond the role of technology transfer).

In addition to accessing appropriate and useful research-based information, we need to be open to adopting more progressive education techniques that will facilitate the rapid spread of information about innovative production, management, marketing and community practices that strengthen local agriculture. Curriculum-based, classroom programs and individual consultations should not be abandoned, but they need to be balanced with new approaches, especially those that empower clients to become self-learners and co-learners.

Extension should consider alternatives/supplements to farm visits as means of establishing personal educational relationships with farmers. By encouraging farmers to have fax, computers, etc, regional information compiled by faculty could be retrieved by individual producers efficiently and conveniently.

Broad audiences could be reached, and connected, by establishing networks (in person and/or electronically) of agriculturists, landowners, and citizens with a common interest in a public issue, technology, research effort, etc.

Examples of successes with alternative educational methods include study circles, participatory assistance, the Practical Farmers of Iowa, etc. At UVM, the pasture management outreach program, the CREAM program, and the Agroecology Institute are examples of alternative, experiential education.

The intent of using these kinds of methods is described in the National Level Strategic Plan for Agriculture, which highlights the need for networking and constituent empowerment processes as alternatives to traditional technology transfer methods.

Proposed Vision, Mission, and Educational Goals:

Vision Statement

Vermont will be a place where farming is profitable, diversified, and resource conserving; where farm families are numerous and enjoy a high quality of life; and where there is strong support for a thriving agriculture.

Mission Statement:

To support and encourage Vermont's people to make a living, improve their quality of life and strengthen communities by managing human, land and other resources in and ecologically sound and economically competitive manner.

Educational Goals:

Provide factual information to agricultural producers that is useful and progressive and which supports efficient, profitable and environmentally-sound farming practices.

Teach farmers, landowners and managers of natural resources about tools for comprehensive decision-making.

Facilitate networks for sharing of experiential knowledge among a diversity of people with an interest in agriculture.

Forge partnerships between and among farmers, educators, scientists, regulators, policy makers and consumers in order to improve people's understanding and control of their food system.

Explain to the public the value of interconnections among agriculture, community development, tourism, recreation, wildlife and a citizenry that values natural resources and open space.

Encourage future generations to understand, value and become involved in agriculture.