



Recommendation to the
PES & Soil Health Working Group to
Facilitate a Participatory Decision-Making Process with
Farmers

May 24, 2021

Signatories request that funds from the [\\$250,000 allocated in H. 315 \(2021\)](#) for the PES & Soil Health Working Group's research be invested in services that will facilitate a participatory decision-making process so that the full diversity of Vermont farmer voices and perspectives guide the PES & Soil Health Working Group's recommendations for program development to the legislature.

Specifically, we recommend that the Working Group develop a budget that reflects the following values and guiding principles and ensures a process that:

- Incorporates [principles for democratic organizing](#);¹
- Consults with Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC)-led and farmer-led organizations;
- Conducts outreach to BIPOC community members and other stakeholders;
- Provides payments to compensate eligible working group members as well as participating farmers, land managers, and farm workers involved in the process of program development;
- Ensures proposals consider not only environment & economic viability but also combat systemic racial and economic inequities in our food system; and
- Incorporates the Working Group's articulated holistic vision to compensate farmers for adapting land management practices and to reward farmers who already provide ecosystem services.

We additionally recommend the Working Group adopt the following 6-Point Plan for a successful implementation of the mandate:²

1. Inventory existing programs and existing financial incentives for various conservation practices, as mandated by the legislative charges # 1 and # 2.
2. Share this information with farmers, land managers, and other identified stakeholders in an educational campaign, and survey farmers on their identified

¹ Solís, Rubén, and Southwest Public Workers Union. "Jemez Principles for democratic organizing." SouthWest Organizing Project. April (1997).

² The legislative charges can be found in Vermont Act 83 (2019), Sec. 24 (a) (1-4).

shortfalls of existing programs, financial incentives (incl. taxes), and services, including their ideas for amending existing programs, financial incentives (incl. taxes), and services.

3. Analyze the feedback gathered in relation to the information about existing programs and financial incentives to identify gaps and needs for improvement. Then, develop legislative and other programmatic options for amending or combining and streamlining existing programs and financial incentives and assess their potential from a social, economic, and ecological perspective.

4. Evaluate the need for new program options to compensate farmers for some of the ecosystem services they provide, to fulfill legislative charge #3. Then, develop PES program proposals based on specific social, economic, and ecological criteria.

5. Survey farmers' and other identified stakeholders' preferences on all the different programmatic options, paired with the social, economic, and environmental assessment information, to enable farmers to evaluate the relative merits of each option.

6. Analyze the input from farmers, and use the input to develop legislation and other recommendations based on the analysed farmer input, fulfilling the mandate of legislative charge #4.

Background:

Credit for the initiation of the PES & Soil Health Working Group process in early 2019 goes to farmers representing the Champlain Valley Farmer Coalition, Franklin-Grand Isle Farmer's Watershed Alliance, and the Connecticut River Watershed Farmers Alliance. While the enabling statute ensures representation of a diversity of farmer-led groups on the PES & Soil Health working group, additional and ongoing farmer involvement is needed to ensure decision making is farmer-led through a participatory process. A farmer/forester-led process would indicate that decision-making about program design – whether by amending existing or creating new legal structures through state legislation – is guided by the voices of farmers consulted for that purpose in an organized and equitable way. The goal is to ensure that any program design is grounded in the experiences that farmers have with programmatic support, aiming to avoid recurring shortfalls or bureaucratic burdens. Furthermore, it is important to acknowledge that farmers are not monolithic, and there are different preferences and viewpoints among constituencies.

For example, the recent 2021 NOFA white paper “Farmers Share Experiences and Challenges Adopting Healthy Soils Practices - A Report from the Northeast Organic Farming Association on Two Years of Collaborative Work” states: *“Incentives for healthy soils practices adoption were the second most-discussed topic. Recorded commentary shows a preference for payment for practice, while a smaller number of farmers suggested that payments should be outcome-based.”* While the watershed alliances may have preferred an outcomes-based approach, this finding illustrates some of the variation in preference and perspective that may be found among different groups of farmers.

Vermont is already a leader in this issue by virtue of establishing and investing in a legislative working group. **Vermont can lead further by initiating an inclusive, fair, and equitable participatory process that centers the diverse voices and needs of farmers in the state and generates the empirical data needed to identify shortfalls and opportunities by those who experience them.** Such a process can guide the Working Group's recommendations about what kind of program design would actually “pay” for “ecosystem services” in the sense of financial rewards and systematic improvements in incentives within and outside of existing programs and solutions for new PES programs. This opportunity for meaningful public participation would also be in the spirit of the PES & Soil Health Working Group’s articulated mission to:

“catalyze a paradigm shift in how farmers are acknowledged and empowered to perform their essential roles of environmental stewardship, as well as providing food and fiber.”

Ask:

Signatories request that the PES & Soil Health Working Group implement the above recommendations not only to fulfill their mandate as laid out in statute, but also to use available funding to realize a participatory decision-making process to guide the PES & Soil Health Working Group’s recommendations for program development.

In spirit of the PES & Soil Health Working Group’s mission,

Caroline Gordon, Rural Vermont

Jennifer Byrne, White River Natural Resources Conservation District

Cat Buxton, PES & Soil Health Working Group Member

Jen Duggan, Conservation Law Foundation Vermont

Sophia Kruszewski, Vermont Law School’s Center for Agriculture and Food Systems

Stephen Leslie, Cedar Mountain Farm and Cobb Hill Cheese