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Futurists worry that Vermont farms have become too reliant on milk

By KEVIN O'CONNOR Staff Writer

The Council on the Future of Vermont knows the state treasures its farms and forests. So why is it asking if there's too much of a good thing?

Surveying almost 4,000 experts and everyday folk at more than 100 meetings, the nonprofit, nonpartisan study group heard more talk about the working landscape than any other topic. Nearly 98 percent of those surveyed, in fact, said they valued the fields, woods and pastures more than any other of the state's features.

"Vermont's identity is linked inextricably to its physical environment, which always has been and continues to be a core value for the people who live here," the council writes in its new 112-page report, "Imagining Vermont: Values and Vision for the Future." "The council heard repeatedly that Vermonters want to hold on to what makes Vermont distinctive, and for most, that means agriculture and the working forest."

Each, however, has its flip side. Take farms: Vermont's dairy industry not only is the largest milk producer in New England but also accounts for nearly 80 percent of the state's agricultural sales. That may be good branding for a state that's home to Ben & Jerry's, but such lack of diversification is bad business with the current plunge in milk prices.

Forests, for their part, cover almost 80 percent of the state. But those who work them face many of the same challenges as dairy farmers: spiraling competition and costs and shrinking manpower and markets.

"It is clear from research findings that Vermont's forest products industry is at a dangerously critical point," the report says, "and the council heard testimony about the number of mills and other working forest enterprises at risk of going out of business."

How can the state reap more from its working landscape and uproot other environmental challenges? The council, through its report and a statewide series of public discussions set to end this week, is planting some suggestions.

'The greenest state'?

When the council sought public comment about Vermont's physical nature, it knew it had to consider more than the state's 6 million acres.

"Many measures serve as indicators of the high quality of the environment in Vermont," it writes. "The state ranks among the highest in the country for the quality of its drinking water, and among the lowest for toxic waste sites, air pollution and other problems. Some national rankings, such as those of Forbes magazine, even suggest that Vermont's strong environmental health makes it the greenest state in the nation."

But in conversations, residents kept referring researchers back to earth.

"In general," the council found, "three sets of values came into play as residents discussed the Vermont environment: the ecology and natural assets of the landscape; the beauty and aesthetic values associated with it; and the economic values of jobs and revenue that can be generated through different uses of it."

Vermonters have wrestled throughout history with how best to work the land. The first settlers labored simply to plow the rocky soil. Today's residents must grapple with air pollution, acid rain, phosphorous and mercury in waterways and the threat of global climate change to maple trees tapped by syrup producers and foliage tours.

"While we have one of the most comprehensive set of environment regulations in the country, the state still struggles to find better ways to deal with sewage, manure and compost as well as increasing volumes of non-organic solid waste — some benign, some toxic," the Center for Social Science Research at St. Michael's College in Colchester writes in a council-commissioned study, "Vermont in Transition."

And those problems, like a growing number of others, are sprouting from the farm.

Swarm of threats

Seen from a car window, farms and forests appear as simple as they are abundant. But stop and walk around and you'll discover a mess of complications.

Although Vermonters surveyed overwhelmingly support agriculture, few actually work in the field. In 1940, farms employed one out of every four laborers. Today, only about 1 percent of the population earns a living farming, fishing or foresting, census figures show.

In the same period, the number of Vermont dairy farms has dropped from 11,000 to 1,000. Agriculture, once the state's economic backbone, now stands behind the service and retail trades, health care, government and education.

Farms are buzzing with a swarm of threats: rising production costs, more competition, less interest from the younger generation and wildly fluctuating prices due to a complex federal formula.

"Dairies in Vermont face all the ups and downs of a commodity marketplace that is

largely out of their control," the council reports. "There are other challenges that are particularly pertinent to Vermont: the feeling that farmers have of being unsupported by the public, the changing nature of the labor force, rising land prices, the loss of the critical mass of farms to support infrastructure in some areas, and the loss of a vital agricultural identity in others."

Forests, in comparison, appear to be growing in size. A century ago, woodland covered about a quarter of Vermont. Today that figure is three-quarters — the third-highest percentage in the nation.

But more landowners, thwarted by the same production and price problems as farmers, are dividing forests into parcels rather than harvesting for lumber, pulp and fuel wood. The situation is leaving everyone to ask: What's the solution?

Diversify, diversify

The council says all 621,000 Vermont residents should want to find an answer. It notes farms "powerfully contribute to Vermont's brand cachet as well as to local and statewide economic development," while the forest allows recreation and "captures and stores carbon and provides other ecological services, clean air and water, as well as natural habitat for the state's biodiversity."

The council uses its report — available on the Web site www.futureofvermont.org — to outline several recommendations. First, it calls for more agricultural diversification, not only so Vermont isn't so reliant on dairy, but also to give it more local foods to eat and export.

"When faced with potential threats from global warming, disease and the decline of the oil-based economy," the council writes, "Vermont needs to rededicate itself to the preservation of its valuable prime agricultural soils to maximize our capacity to feed ourselves in the future."

The council suggests farmers produce a greater variety of fruits, meat and vegetables and tap the Internet to sell artisan cheeses, ice creams, maple products and wine. It also believes local and state government and the tourism and recreation industries need to help preserve farmland and develop "a unified vision and set of economic and regulatory strategies."

"Though the great majority of Vermonters say they want to see the working landscape prosper, public strategy and investment have not lived up to the challenges facing the rural enterprises that have built and sustain much of that landscape," it writes.

The council also points to personal responsibility.

"There is a huge contradiction in Vermonters' professed expression of respect for hard work and for those who work with their hands, and the sense of stigma that workers in Vermont's landscape say they feel," it writes. "This points to the need to take

serious steps, starting with communication of appreciation for the farmers and the people who lead its forest-based enterprises."

'A visionary leader'

The council is sharing its recommendations at a statewide series of public discussions set to conclude Tuesday at Bennington's Southern Vermont College and Wednesday at Brattleboro's Marlboro College Graduate Center, both at 6 p.m.

The public is adding its own suggestions. Participants at a recent Summit on the Future of Vermont in Burlington, noting that residents collectively spend \$2.6 billion on food each year, called for local farmers to produce and sell 75 percent of the state's diet by 2025.

Summit participants want every public school to have a garden and compost project, every farmers market to have the ability to accept food stamps, and state-funded institutions such as schools and prisons to spend at least 75 percent of their food dollars on local products.

The council also has heard from Vermonters who want to build on the state's pioneering bottle redemption, billboard ban and land use and planning laws.

"Many Vermonters would like to see this state step up its focus on the environment — to be once again a visionary leader," the council writes in its report. "They believe that the state should continue to push creative environmental solutions that keep Vermont special and serve as a model for others."

For many, it's not simply a matter of regulating development, "but on intentionally building a dynamic and innovative green economy that depends on, grows from, and enhances the environment and Vermont's green reputation to bring prosperity and vitality to the state's residents and communities."

The council points to the growth not only of the "buy local" movement but also of composting and energy projects such as wind or methane from cows.

"Future technologies and economic opportunities may provoke new compromises and even a 21st-century redefinition of the working landscape," it writes. "We need to recognize that the working landscape depends on a strong farm and forest economy, and that unless this economy prospers, Vermont could lose the working landscape in the next generation."

The key to keeping the state green, the council believes, is finding common ground.

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