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Article published Nov 28, 2009

## **The importance of a working landscape**

By ROGER ALLBEE

here has been a lot of discussion recently about Vermont's working landscape. We know, for example, that 97 percent of Vermonter's say they want a working landscape for their state in the future, according to the survey commissioned by the Council on the Future of Vermont.

The recent designation of Vermont as the number five destination in the world and the number one destination in the United States by National Geographic Traveler Magazine further highlights the importance of our working landscape to those who visit Vermont. It is an attribute that carries with it a great deal of importance to our economy, our way of life, and what many of us believe is the essence of our state.

Vermont's working landscape, however, is under a great deal of stress and many working farms are in financial jeopardy. Dairy farming utilizes the majority of land in Vermont. Since January of this year, some 53 Vermont dairy farms have ceased operating. Keeping the land open and having it productively used continues to be a challenge that policy makers, farmers, and others have wrestled with for many years.

Programs to address the challenges have included the development of the Use Value Tax program, the purchase of development rights under the Vermont Housing and Conservation Board, the Act 250 mitigation approach for any development on prime or statewide soils, the Interstate Dairy Compact, to mention a few.

These important, but less than comprehensive approaches, some are arguing, have not been enough to stem the tide of the loss of productive agricultural land conversion and the loss of working farms.

It is therefore encouraging that the Vermont Council on Rural Development, as part of its effort to determine what policies will help Vermont retain its rural working landscapes, has put in place a process to address these issues. It is an effort that policymakers at all levels should take note of too. As Vermont's Secretary of Agriculture, I applaud this effort.

Roger Allbee is the Vermont Agency of Agriculture Secretary. He lives in Townshend.

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