

Barton Chronicle
Lead---02/01/12 Working landscape
By Paul Lefebvre

MONTPELIER — “I dip therefore I yam” is a motto that belongs to Lisa Johnson of Norwich, who testified recently about a niche product, Yummy Yams, she is producing from a crop seldom seen on the Vermont landscape.

“I want to change the way people think about sweet potatoes,” she recently told the House Committee on Agriculture

Committee members heard a morning’s worth of testimony from land base entrepreneurs that included the head of a wood pellet plant near Rutland.

Chris Brooks, a man with “one foot in the farm and one foot in forestry,” offered testimony that hands-down would be the envy of every small businessman.

“People are beating down our door to get our product,” he advised, as one of the witnesses who want the Legislature to get its hands dirty when it comes to making a living off the land.

The working landscape has been around for a long awhile as a concept. It played a big role in the rationale behind the current land use program, fashioned to provide a property tax break to landowners who kept their land in production.

And when the first industrial wind farm was proposed for the Northeast Kingdom, developers argued that turbines would become part of the rural area’s working landscape.

But while the concept has been used by different groups for different purposes, this year marks the first time the concept has been transformed into a piece of legislation.

There are bills in both the House and the Senate that aim to provide an economic stimulus for those who work the land and those who aspire to making a living from Vermont’s woods and fields.

As the head of the Vermont Council on Rural Development, Paul Costello is spearheading a push that he hopes will attract young blood to the state — young blood entrepreneurs, that is, who will start businesses connected to the land. At the same time, however, he knows that in order to keep them here and connected to the land, they are going to need investors who believe in them. That’s where legislation would play a role.

Presently, the good news is that there are more small farms today than there were ten years ago. But the flip side, says Mr. Costello is that roughly 40 percent make less than \$2,500 annually.

People are coming into Vermont who want to be part of a land-based economy. As young people they see a life connected to the land as cool and

ethical. But what happens when they start having kids, wonders Mr. Costello.

Rachel Schattman started working the land in 2009 by raising vegetable on two acres of land at Interval, in Chittenden County. In 2010, she grossed \$11,000 and nearly doubled that gross in 2010.

Presently, she has an old farm with a standing barn that her mother bought in Monkton. There is ten acres of tillable soil, and she hopes at some point to quit her job at the UVM Extension Office and earn her living entirely off the land, along with an organic pesto she makes.

During her testimony before the House Committee on Agriculture, she said she would let the business die if by the end of five or six years it was “not producing a salary.”

The workings lands bill in each chamber of the Legislature would create a board to administer funds that represent the “state’s investment in the working lands enterprise economy.” The bill seeks a \$3 million allocation to start that would eventually increase to \$15 million annually.

The funding request has already hit a snag, as there was no \$3 million appropriated in Governor Peter Shumlin’s budget.

The effort to get the bill moving is, says Mr. Costello, “a steep climb that is not going to happen without public support.”

Most grass-root-driven legislation requires a staying power if it is going to pass from bill into law. At a public hearing in the State House last month, the bill’s ideological underpinnings got off to a hearty and vociferous support. No less an in-state personality than Tom Slayton, the former editor of Vermont Life, gave it a ringing endorsement.

The working landscape is “part of who we are as Vermonters,” he said, adding it was time to act to prevent Vermont’s traditional culture from becoming “part of a suburban consumer culture.”

He told the story on how on a recent trip to the Northeast Kingdom he visited the last farm on a road where there used to be ten. “This is happening all over Vermont,” he said.

Mr. Slayton was one of roughly 40 people at the hearing who overwhelmingly testified in support of the bill. Others who gave testimony said it would do things like “put sustainability in the realm of economic development;” that it would help make a wood maker’s life profitable; that it would fuel Vermont’s agricultural renaissance; that it would be a “step forward.”

Mateo Kehler, a cheese maker from Greensboro, said what might have the bill’s most enduring irony when it comes to preserving open land.

“If you want things to remain the same, some things have to change,” he said.

Beyond the hearing, some legislators grouched that the bill with its meager funding would do little for the conventional dairy farmer. In their eyes the bill appears to be offering a helping hand for the niche, non-conventional farmer who lacks the capital to get a land-based business up and running on his or her own.

But those who will help by the bill don't see it that way.

"I personally don't believe in free money," testified Andy Kehler, Mateo's brother and business partner in the Jasper Hill Farm at Greensboro.

Mr. Kehler flat-out assertion came after members of the committee quizzed him on his attitude toward government grants. Representative Norm McAlister of Franklin expressed fears that the bill new Working Lands Enterprise Board would add another layer of bureaucracy to state government. And more duplication.

"That's what gives me a little heartburn with the whole idea," he said.

Earlier in his testimony Mr. Kehler said the point of bill was to "create a framework" that would enable the working landscape to "compete against the pressures of development."

He said a Community Block Grant had allowed "us to accelerate the organic development of our business." He went on to argue there is a need for bill that will focus on people engage in an enterprise that conventional lenders see as questionable.

Low interest, revolving loan funds — like the one created by the Town of Greensboro, which lent his business \$379,000 with a 15-year payback — are what is needed, he said.

Mr. Kehler as well as others who testified believes the public should make an investment in the working landscape. One of the conclusions the bill draws say that "Vermonters overwhelmingly identify the working landscape as one of the aspects of Vermont they value the most."

When pushed to characterize the bill, Mr. Costello, who has helped organize the Vermont Agriculture Viability Council along with the Vermont Forest Products Council, calls the measure a jobs bill.

For over 40 years, he says, conventional dairy farming has had a crisis every three years. But that's not going to cut it today. Alternatives are needed.

"It's all about creativity and innovation," he says when talking about sustaining a working landscape. "We cannot succeed in a global economy by being only in commodity production."

As the president of his own pellet company, Chris Brook told House members of the Committee on Agriculture that more mills are the key to a value-added business in the forestry industry. He said

there is room and supply enough in the state for five more pellet plants like his own.

Mr. Brooks got his plant up and running by buy second-hand farm machinery, like those that once ground feed. And he started by going after low interest loans rather than applying for grants.

"I'm a capitalist," he said. "I got skin in the game."

The biggest obstacle to creating a viable pellet making industry in the state, he said, stems from attrition in the logging industry.

He testified there are fewer and fewer loggers in Vermont, and those that are still active are old and getting older.

Mr. Brooks was the only woods entrepreneur among the four who testified last week before the committee. And in the push to treat agriculture and forestry as co-equals, Ms. Schattman advised there had to be some "partner building" between the two before the forest industry could gain parity with agriculture.

Mr. Costello believes that Vermont land-based businesses need public and private investors. He believes the bill will foster a partnership between the agriculture community and forest community — one in which each will be seen as equal partners or as "a merger of interwoven economies that should be treated as a whole."

As a measure that requires public support, he says the bill could determine if Vermont will has a strong working landscape 20 years down the road.

Further testimony on the bill will be taken by other committee in the Legislature, including the Senate Committee on Economic Development, Housing and General Affairs. The committee is chaired by Senator Vince Illuzzi of Derby, one of the sponsors of the Senate bill.