

## Working Lands Investments allocated \$2.1 million; House vote is Thursday

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Parallel bills to invest in rural economic development have cleared key hurdles in the House and the Senate, and the House version is scheduled for a vote Thursday.

The bills create a Working Lands Enterprise Fund, which would invest state money in grants and loans to businesses related to the rural economy, infrastructure like slaughter facilities and incubator kitchens, and direct services to businesses related to the farm, food, and forest economies.

The bills passed unanimously out of each chamber's agriculture committees, but funding has been less unanimous. The House Appropriations Committee voted Tuesday to allocate \$2.1 million for its version of the bill (H.496). It's less than the \$3 million originally in the bill, but supporters say the amount is sufficient to start needed state investment in rural economic development.

A coalition supporting the Working Lands Enterprise Investment bill grew out of the Council on the Future of Vermont, a 2007-2009 project of the Vermont Center on Rural Development. In over a dozen public forums and more than 100 focus groups plus surveys and other inputs, Vermonters consistently expressed their support for a strong economy for farm- and forest-based enterprises. On the surveys, the highest-ranked statement of values was "I value the working landscape and its heritage."

Vermont Center for Rural Development now leads the Working Landscape Partnership, which supports these bills.

"If current trends continue, we could lose the working landscape within a generation," VCRD executive director Paul Costello said in an interview before the session started.

The center looked at the contradiction between the forest and fields landscape valued by Vermonters, according to its polls, and the decline in the forest and dairy economies.

"At the same time, we have a local foods movement that is growing rapidly. We're first in the nation in per capita organic farm CSA development [and] farmers' markets' direct sales to consumers," Costello said. "We have a great tradition in the forest products industry, a great deal of skill, beautiful hardwood forests that are very enviable globally. So tremendous assets to start with, but we believe that Vermont needs to look at these assets and determine that they are essential to our economic future and set as a priority the future of the working landscape economy as a foundation for the rest of the economy of the state."

Rural economic development has also been the subject of informal study by the Legislature's Rural Economic Development Working Group, created during Gaye Symington's tenure as Speaker of the House.

The bill sets up a Working Landscape Enterprise Board to oversee the administration of the fund. The House and Senate versions of the bill set up the membership of the board differently, but in both cases, it's a board that needs a meeting space considerably bigger than a breadbox. The House version sets it at 19 members, with 11 appointed by the existing Vermont Agriculture and Forest Products Development board. The Senate bill sets up a 24-member board, with the governor, the Speaker of the House, and the Senate Committee on Committees each appointing six. Those appointments are constrained by descriptions of the types of appointee, e.g., two of the governor's appointees are to be "a person familiar with the agricultural or forest tourism industry" and "a member of the Northeast Organic Farming Association of Vermont."

In both bills, the main authority for rural economic development lies in the Agency of Agriculture, Food, and Markets rather than the Agency of Commerce and Community Development — though the Commerce secretary is named as a member of the board. Rep. Will Stevens, I-Shoreham, lead sponsor of the bill, is an organic farmer and member of the Agriculture Committee. He explained in an interview that the program is housed with the Agriculture Agency "because of the natural resource focus, our land-based focus. There are many opportunities and tools available on the commerce side of things, which is fine. We're saying through this bill that in fact our natural resource base is worthy of that attention too. It's not a silo-building or 'either/or.' It's an 'and' situation."

While Costello declined to make specific predictions about the number of jobs that the Working Lands

bill would create, he pointed in a recent interview to a report just out from the Vermont Sustainable Jobs Fund's Farm-to-Plate program, which counted 500 jobs created in one year in the state's food and agriculture sector. With state money anticipated to pull in four to five times as much private investment, Costello said the new bill "leverages far beyond what we've had ... in agriculture and forest products. I think we're at the beginning of something that's really big, really significant for the rural economy of the state."

The House Appropriations Committee informally set aside \$2.1 million to the bill on March 16, without examining the bill in detail. On Tuesday, Will Stevens and House Agriculture Committee chair Carolyn Partridge, D-Windham, testified to the Appropriations Committee about the bill, and the committee voted to appropriate the \$2.1 million. The vote was along party lines, with the Democrats supporting the bill. (Kitty Toll, D-Danville, a supporter of the bill, was reportedly out of the Legislature responding to the killing of Melissa Jenkins, the St. Johnsbury teacher who was found dead earlier this week.)

Committee member Joe Acinapura, R/D-Brandon, supports the bill's principle but voted against it on fiscal grounds. "The concept is good. It's a job creator," he said the day after the vote. However, he expects the shortfall to be greater than projected, and the House budget leaves \$16 million in reserves — a figure he fears is inadequate. "If we're going to put \$2.1 million against a new initiative, even though it's a great initiative, what are we going to take the money from? There are just too many uncertainties out there."

The full House is scheduled to vote on the bill Thursday. So far, Costello has seen "general and broad interest" in it among legislators. "Everyone recognizes that this is the bill that steps forward," Costello said. "There's not another jobs bill."

Sen. Ann Cummings, D-Washington, has indicated that the Senate will take up work on the House bill rather than continue working on its own version.

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