

## **October 25 2012 Meeting with Middlebury Area Farmers**

Attendees: 9 total

These summaries reflect a range of views expressed on the issues as discussed during informal conversation in small focus group meetings. They do not reflect the formal or public position of any one group of people, organization or coalition. All errors and omissions are the sole responsibility of EMC/CBI.

*Italics contain comments from attendees that are indicative of common elements, themes and sentiments expressed. The conversations were not recorded and, therefore, they may not be verbatim quotations.*

### **I. Questions Asked At the Meeting From Farmers**

#### **A. Lake Champlain Phosphorous Levels**

1. How much phosphorous in the lake is due to agricultural practices, do they know?
2. How are the numbers derived?
3. Information can change based on new data, do we have the right information?

*We make a lot of assumptions about what things are impacting the lake but when the testing is better, we get better information. I was part of a study looking at where e.coli was coming from and the assumption was that it was not coming from the forest lands but when that assumption was tested after a rain event, we learned that in the forest the e.coli numbers shot up. Originally thought that forests were pristine and organic but the truth is it was a huge source of e. coli. When you get better information you know more. In looking at the phosphorous in the lake, do we have the information we need at this point?*

#### **B. Information Needed to Address Water Quality Issues in Agricultural Sector**

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1. Don't we need to know more information about what is going on in each farm?
2. If we knew more about what was going on couldn't we target those areas?
3. Don't you know how many cows I have, or how many my neighbor has? Who has horses and where they are located?
4. What about the guy with ten beefers? How can you regulate if you don't know anything about him?
5. If you had better data couldn't you use the information to tell you that on this farm over here they produce too much manure but right next door they have capacity to take more manure onto the land, wouldn't that information be helpful?

C. Tailoring Programs To Better Address the Problems

1. What are other states doing? Shouldn't we look to what they are doing for information on what we should do?
2. Isn't the issue not just what a program costs but what it is getting you in the end?  
  
*Farms have done a lot in the last ten years especially and yet the lake looks even worse. We are doing everything we have been told to do so the lake should not be in the shape it is in.*
3. Why couldn't you have different sets of regulations so that if you were in a "red zone" area you had to meet all the regular rules but you also had to do more because of where the farm was located?
4. How would you establish your goal posts (water quality BMPs and back stops)?

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5. What about flexibility, if farms had flexibility, wouldn't we be able to meet the goals?

## **II. What Practices Are You Doing That Improve Water Quality?**

- A. The majority of farmers at this meeting were classified as MFOs, as a result they fell under more regulated aspects of state agriculture practices.
  1. Livestock exclusion was seen as a common sense practice on their farms. Need to be aware that there are added costs to this practice, cost share covers fencing but also need to address bringing in fresh water and shade to the cows with fresh water being more important.
  2. Nutrient management planning was seen as a particularly helpful tool because it combined farm specific information and technical assistance on the farm.
  3. NRCS cost shares that helped farms with waste management systems such as lagoons, liquid manure systems
  4. Cover crops
  5. Tile drains
  6. Addressing conditions in ditches

- B. Specific comments related to these practices:

*Working with the UVM extension personnel is critical, having the technological support out on the farm and vital to any new program getting off the ground.*

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Every farmer agreed with the farmer that made this comment and said that the UVM extension teams were a very good investment for the state and they would be negatively impacted if those positions went away. They also indicated that if the state was going to require smaller farms to have more regulations the extension teams would need to help with technical assistance, education and outreach.

*If you would cost share more for cover crops, I would do my whole farm.*

*Helicopter seeding for rye is cutting edge I'd like to see more of those programs.*

*Farmers are creatures of habit, once they do something a couple of times and get a positive result, they will continue to do it – this is why cover cropping is so successful —that and the cost share.*

### **III. What Practices Are Not Working Well?**

#### **A. Lack of Flexibility in Practices and Programs**

1. Farmer noted that there was more flexibility for programs and how they are implemented at the state level but the state didn't have the funding for many of the practices. The federal side had the funding but lacked flexibility.
2. Most welcome was the idea of some flexibility in the system. Each farm is situated on unique footing—no two farms have the same issues, topography, elevation, access to water, access to waterways, soil type, financing, livestock, etc. for that reason, one size fits all types of regulations were not helpful.

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3. Some federal programs are not able to assist farms as well as they could because they cannot be customized for the farms. If there were a range of BMPs aimed at improving water quality that had the same point value and a farmer could choose which of those would be best for the farm then that would help ensure that both water quality objectives could be met but also that the farm can make good planning decisions.
4. One area of discussion revolved around the manure spreading ban. When that was put in place, farms did not have widespread access to or made use of nutrient management plans. Today, farms that have nutrient management plans have most specific information about their farms and know more about what is needed and what actions are not best practices.

One farmer stated that the ban is not a good rule and it has not helped, the lake has not benefited from it or we would see an improvement in the condition of the lake because the ban has been in place for a long time. The spreading times should respond to soil conditions, weather, size of farm, location, and so on.

*There needs to be a stick in place to ensure people respond but, for some people, they know their lands, they know what they need, there should be some way to be flexible with those farms.*

#### B. The way programs are introduced and implemented

One farmer notes that there are situations where you sign up for a practice and are on the list, and at the time you sign up the money is calculated but because you can't implement it until the fourth or fifth year, the overall price of the project goes up but the cost share amount stays the same. Where you may be trying to get

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more people into new programs that may take some time and the costs may go up and the farmer may end up having to pay more for his cost share than he thought when he signed up. That is a problem.

C. Lack of funding for popular programs like cover cropping.

#### IV. **Feedback on Practices, Regulations & Ideas to Improve Water Quality**

A. Nutrient management plans for smaller farms:

1. Seen as a viable option.
2. The full 590 paperwork was discussed and some stated that it would be too burdensome for smaller farms and not cost effective for them,
3. A shorter form and some outreach and education to smaller farms and those “hobby” farmers and those who keep a few livestock (a horse, goats, etc.) on their property seemed reasonable and fair—part of asking everyone to take some responsibility and part of being accountable.
4. One farmer notes that whether to report or not to report is not the issue—the issue is what is the practical effect of this what is it costing you to do this and what are you getting from this?

*Large and medium farms have a lot of oversight, when you have acres in flood plain or in watershed area you are under scrutiny. You won't get a lot more reduction in flows to the lake from the larger farms. We are already doing everything we should be doing, but you need to go out to the smaller farms now – all land users.*

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B. Inspections on the farms and increased enforcement would be helpful

*Its not just about dairy, what about goats and sheep and horses? Hay and corn and vegetable farmers, need to concentrate on all of it-- it's all part of accountability.*

C. Livestock exclusion --- larger operations have already taken the steps needed to keep livestock out of running streams.

D. Outreach and education on AAPs for more small farms supported. Mandatory attendance at a yearly event for education was seen as a good idea.

*People want to do the right thing if they know what that is they will generally try and do it.*

*Vegetable farmers use a lot of compost and don't understand the impact, there is not enough education.*

E. If more resources needed to be deployed in critical source areas then some believed that this was appropriate because it targets the assistance where most needed.

F. It was seen as appropriate to have regulations with more stringent requirements to those who wanted to farm in critical source areas.

G. Unequal allocation of resources would be poorly received by some because if one farm received a higher cost share or was able to implement the practice sooner it

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would not go over well with other farmers in the area but generally the idea that some farms should receive more support because of the critical source issue was seen as necessary to address water quality issues.

- H. However, if there was unequal treatment then it would cause some farmers to not implement certain practices unless they were mandated. For example, if a farmer received a 100% cost share because they were in a critical source area and a farmer not in the critical source area only received 50%, this may not be a practice they would adopt because of the unequal cost share payments unless the practice was mandated by the state or federal government.
- I. Banning growing of corn in flood plain as a blanket rule lacked common sense. Recognition needed around fact that in specific areas, flood plains are recipients of the silt not donors to it – depends on the topography. It would be short sighted to have a blanket rule saying no farming in the flood plain. Would definitely need to have an incentive to change the practice but need the flood plains in some areas to remain in agricultural production because it controls soil erosion and water in flood events.

## **V. Discussion of a Certainty Program**

- A. Success of this program depends on education about what the back stops are.

*If EPA has set these standards and we have to meet them with backstops if we don't then if farmers were made aware of what the backstops were then more farmers would probably want to participate because they don't want to have the backstop fall on them. This would be a series of consequences that could run us out of business. Need education, support and technical assistance for that.*

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- B. In general, promise of having regulators take a hands off approach if a farmer had signed up for certain practices was a positive but farmers had trouble envisioning what this would look like and whether this was possible.
- C. More favored the idea of a point system that provided credit and recognition for implementation of best practice management techniques. Seen as important was that farmers get credit for all of the BMPs that they have done already, have been doing for many years.
- D. Incentives that were appealing included ability to choose between various programs that all addressed water quality but could be selected by the farm based on its needs and goals.
- E. Having higher cost share percentages for early adopters of the practice was seen as a positive incentive.
- F. Outreach and public education for what farmers have already been doing and are continuing to do would be helpful.

*Seems to me that we have been doing a lot, the public doesn't understand how much and we get the blame but not any understanding of how much has changed on farms.*

*We don't talk a lot about our industry, and there are so many misconceptions out there and a lot of negative judgments passed on us.*

*It's not your grandpa's farm. The biggest change is our awareness of the environment and the significance of the impact of what we do.*

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G. Implementing new practices to address water quality – need to think about not just the cost today but the cost 20 years down the line and whether the practice will address the issue you are trying to target.

**VI. Discussion on Other Ideas**

- A. One farmer reported that he had a private contact with a wastewater facility to take their bio-solids to spread and it paid enough to allow the farmer to buy equipment he needed.
- B. Nutrient trading program was of interest, would want to explore this issue further
- C. Discussion on the need to keep manure off the roads to prevent run-off from road surfaces but also because it creates ill will in the community against farmers as they are blamed for tracking manure all over roads. One farmer wondered if the Department of Transportation had any funds available to help farmers establish draglines or culverts to use to keep the tractors and machines off the roads when spreading.
- D. Putting roofs over bunkers was not seen as cost effective.

<b>Commonly Used Agricultural Terms</b>	
<b>Acronym</b>	<b>Definition</b>
BMPs	Best Management Practices
FAPs	Farm Agronomic Practices
TMDL	Total Maximum Daily Load
LCB	Lake Champlain Basin
AAPs	Accepted Agricultural Practice regulations
MFOs	Medium Farm Operations (200-699 mature animals)
LFOs	Large Farm Operations (700+ mature animals)

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