

**Date: 11/15/2012 Meeting with Conservation Districts**

Attendees: 18 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.

I. **Discussion Regarding Whether the Water Quality Practices Would be Geographically Localized or Would be Required Statewide.**

Observations were:

-One of the issues to be addressed is that if the practices you are implementing are statewide, then the discussion needs to focus on the watershed issues near to the farms you are working with. A farm in the south does not necessarily pay attention to a practice if it is designed to address Lake Champlain. Outreach needs to also focus on the Connecticut River and other TMDLs that are involved. Letting people know the time line and the impacts for other TMDLs is a good idea.

If this is statewide, need to have a point person in each part of the state.

Not all TMDLs are for the same issue, controlling nitrogen vs. phosphorous runoff may have different practices associated with them.

II. **Concern Expressed Over Engaging/Supporting Smaller Farms and More Diverse Farming Practices**

There are only so many resources available, how do you know what type of assistance the farm needs? Is it money for a practice? Is it technical assistance to implement the practice?

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-Small farms are not heavily regulated, need to bring them along but can't expect that they would react well to heavy regulation.

-Smaller farmers do not think there is any enforcement directed at them. Therefore if you are going to threaten this you must follow through on it. There must be teeth to any required practices.

-Farmers don't know all of the resources, programs, tools available to them. Need a way to communicate this to them

-Grazing farmers need more support. This is a viable alternative that will help improve water quality but there is a need for technical assistance and education so farmers understand and can implement grazing based practices on their farms.

-Models exist showing how a grazing based farm can be more profitable. Where the system is more profitable, farmers will want to use it. As more farmers use this, less need for corn and run off is gradually reduced.

-Grazing farmers need help, they are usually small, not enough labor to set the farm up correctly to enable a small farm to be successful at it—need a farmer-to-farmer based network where they can reach out get assistance and learn from one another.

-In general poor management practices create problems for farms. Where systems can be shown to be more efficient, farmers will use them but it takes education, outreach and working one on one with the farm.

-Need better cropland management tools—many barnyard manure issues have been addressed but the “in the field” issues have not been looked at the same way.

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-Need more education/outreach on AAPs.

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

#### A. Nutrient Management Plans

-This will be very burdensome for smaller farmers.

-If it is a full 590 then smaller dairy farms will sell their cows and leave, because its too much paperwork!

-Smaller, scaled down would be better but how will it be useful?

-UVM extension is reporting that less and less phosphorus is being added to the soil, maybe the smaller farms don't have to do soil tests each year and only need to do it if the soil is at a certain level, or there is erosion in that area. Then once the field is in balance, suspend the need for the annual testing and retest every few years instead.

-This is a time issue as well. Smaller farms don't have the time it takes to use a full NMP—the tracking and monitoring is too much.

-Smaller farmers may not have the tools needed to measure what is being applied to a field to be able to use the NMP the way it is designed to be used-- even if they wanted to follow through on tracking the information.

-The critical issue is to develop NMPs that look as good on the ground as they do in paper. Otherwise why would a farm use the plan?

-Having a plan is not enough, implementation of the plan must be part of the practice.

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## B. Livestock Exclusion

-Financial sustainability is important especially for beginning farmers or we will lose our smaller farms and they will leave the state.

-Need a thoughtful, well-resourced concept that targets the resources we have and the goals to be accomplished

To get any practice implemented you need to understand why its not happening. Is it because the farmer doesn't know how? Money? Its important to understand when working with the farm what the issue is.

Sometimes farmers just do not know what the requirements are. Conservation and NRCS work to get the information out to the farmer so there is greater compliance. If they aren't doing it because there is no money, but the practice is required, the farmer can't do it if there is no money from anywhere to help him get it done.

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

-What is a late adaptor?

-How will nitrogen be addressed?

-How will the people get information on these issues/initiatives?

-Farmers have spent money already implementing practices. They have invested in specific ways to handle manure- e.g. manure injectors or drag lines, lagoons, etc. The system they have for manure management must be made part of the implementation plan for whatever else needs to be added in. That will be different for each farm.

-If you are going to insist on certain practices, be sure there is a local base of suppliers and technical support to help farmers get it done. Frustrating when a farm signs up for a program and then discovers there is no one local to help them and they end up waiting for help from another state to come to them.

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V. **Education/Remediation Based versus Enforcement Based Orientation**

Concern was expressed regarding how VAAFM and DEC would enforce regulatory parts of the plan. Conservation districts are not involved in enforcement. VACD can work with farms to improve AAP practices and with outreach, education, and understanding but VAAFM inspects.

-Could have a way where farms are given help, technical assistance and money to fix issues and then once the time is up, there is a regulatory inspection and maybe penalties assessed at that time.

-Districts are willing to do the awareness pieces but not the enforcement.

-Remediation was favored over enforcement.

-Agricultural Environmental Management takes a lot of time, patience and is very labor-intensive. There is a lot of work to be done on the farm with the farmers. There is no quick way to get it done, building the relationship, taking the time to understand what the issues are and the perspective of the farmer is critical to changing the way things are done on the farm. Unclear if enforcement would provide a better incentive to accomplish the work that needs to be done.

-Support for new farmers. Could you use the lending community to drive home the message about the AAPs? What if new farmers needed to demonstrate that they would meet the AAPs before getting approval? That way if the farm's business plan does not include a way to meet the AAPs, then why are they in business? The loan community can be partners in this effort. AAPs can be wrapped up into the cost of the loan. Maybe they have to get certified before getting the loan.

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