

The 1981 General Assembly

AGRICULTURE: MORE SYMBOLISM THAN SUBSTANCE?

Reagan's recommended reduction in milk price supports and the ongoing Congressional debate over the reconstituted milk bill may have more impact on the health of local farming than any action by the Vermont Legislature. However, the General Assembly is considering several dozen agricultural bills covering everything from predator control to prime agricultural land designation. Most of them aim to preserve farmland by protecting it from development or by making farming more profitable. Unfortunately, the bills with the best chance of becoming law seem to be those which offer more symbolic than actual support for farming.

Early in the session, Representative Maurice Arnold of Whiting sponsored a bill to cut all further planning and construction of I-93, an interstate highway which would cut through two productive dairy farms near St. Johnsbury. It was referred to the Transportation Committee, which not only killed it, but buried it so thoroughly that it can never return from the grave.

On February 19th, the full House approved H.345, the so-called "right-to-farm" bill, which protects reasonable agricultural activities such as farm machinery operation and manure-spreading from lawsuits based on the theory of nuisance.

Chester Scott of Windsor County sponsored a Senate bill to enable the State to purchase development rights to farmland (S.25). But the bill would require a substantial appropriation, and the Legislature is not in a spending mood.

S.24, H.39 and H.239 all aim to make farming more profitable by giving farming the same kind of support the State gives industry through the Vermont Industrial Development Authority (VIDA). S.24 and H.239 would enable VIDA to provide low interest loans and grants for agricultural development projects, while H.39 would establish a separate authority for agriculture. Opponents of the bills argue that the State is already losing one-half million dollars a year on the VIDA program, and that setting up a separate agricultural development authority would only add another layer of bureaucracy.

H.82, a bill patterned after Minnesota's Family Farm Security Act, would enable qualified new farmers to borrow money at low interest rates, but this bill does not appear to have the support of the House Agriculture Committee. Committee Chairman Gordon Booth is drafting an alternative to H.82 which would exempt farm sellers from State taxes as long as they sold to another farmer and took the first mortgage themselves at an interest rate below that of the Farmers Home Administration.

The Agriculture Committee is also discussing a bill to appropriate \$100,000 to conduct an "input-output study" to identify farming's value to Vermont and to assess the costs and benefits of removing land from agricultural production for competing commercial, industrial and recreational purposes.

THE LEGISLATIVE ACTION COMMITTEE

The newly-organized Legislative Action Committee spearheads VNRC's lobbying efforts this year. Committee members analyze and chart the progress of key environmental bills, provide testimony and written memoranda, and line up volunteers to call or write legislators in their districts. The Committee's priorities for this legislative session include energy conservation, agricultural vitality and Chapter 117 revisions, and it supports those bills which appear most promising. The Committee may alter its position as bills are amended and rewritten, and the focus of attention may shift somewhat as the session proceeds.

COMMUNITY ENERGY PLANNING CONFERENCE

VNRC is co-sponsoring an all-day "Community Energy Planning Conference" in Montpelier on Friday, March 20th. Presentations and panel discussions will feature several town energy planning "success stories." It should be a productive and practical workshop for town energy coordinators, town officials and others concerned with local solutions to our energy fix. For details, call VNRC at 223-2328.

ENERGY: CONSERVATION IS THE BEST SOURCE

These days, every public official has at least one comprehensive solution to Vermont's energy woes, be it mainlining Canadian hydro, sticking windmills on the state's highest mountains, or burning wood to produce heat to produce electricity to produce heat. But while we're meditating on the merits of the various methods, rising energy costs continue to short-circuit the state's economy.

VNRC's Legislative Action Committee believes that conservation is the best solution to Vermont's power problems. "We need to do something quickly, and conservation is the cheapest and least environmentally-dangerous source of energy," according to Committee Chairman Rebecca Davison. The Committee supports a conservation bill introduced by Representative Anne Just of Warren. H.220 would compel electric utilities to demonstrate that they had used all reasonable measures to improve the efficiency of their own procedures--such as peak load management, ripple control and cogeneration--and to assist their customers in energy conservation before they could be granted a permit to construct additional facilities.

The Legislative Action Committee also favors a proposal to funnel \$715,000 into the home energy audit program (H.254). The State Energy Office has been offering free energy audits for about two years and has helped more than 6000 Vermont homes cut energy costs, but the Office has many more requests than it can handle. H.254 would double the size of the program and enable many more Vermonters to take advantage of it.

Another bill with a similar purpose and a smaller price tag may stand a better chance on the House floor. The House Energy Committee drafted a bill to appropriate \$200,000 from the general fund to the Vermont Housing Finance Agency to authorize up to \$5,000,000 in low interest loans for residential energy conservation and conversion to alternate sources. The Committee unanimously approved the bill and sent it on to the House Appropriations Committee.

A STATUS REPORT ON KEY ENVIRONMENTAL BILLS

H.197 is a housekeeping bill, designed to correct some of the flaws in Chapter 117, Vermont's twelve-year-old planning and zoning law. The House Natural Resources Committee will vote on the bill this week and then pass it along to the Municipal Corporations Committee.

H.140. The House Natural Resources Committee unanimously approved a bill authorizing a study of the need to protect significant wetlands, minus its original \$40,000 appropriation. Nevertheless, the Appropriations Committee must formally approve the bill before sending it to the House floor.

H.169, a bill to strengthen Vermont's on-site sewage program, passed the House on February 11th. It has been assigned to the Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee.

S.69, a bill before the Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee, would clear away possible legal barriers to the enforcement of conservation restrictions entrusted to private conservation groups.

S.83 would revise Vermont's Endangered Species Act and thereby entitle the State to share in federal funds for wildlife conservation. It was approved by the Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee last week.

Henry Carse of Hinesburg, Chairman of the House Natural Resources Committee, will introduce a bill prepared by the Agency of Environmental Conservation to set minimum flows for Vermont's streams and rivers. But due to the complex and technical nature of this bill, final action is unlikely this session.

If you have questions about these or other environmental bills, call or write VNRC and we'll be glad to track them down for you.

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