

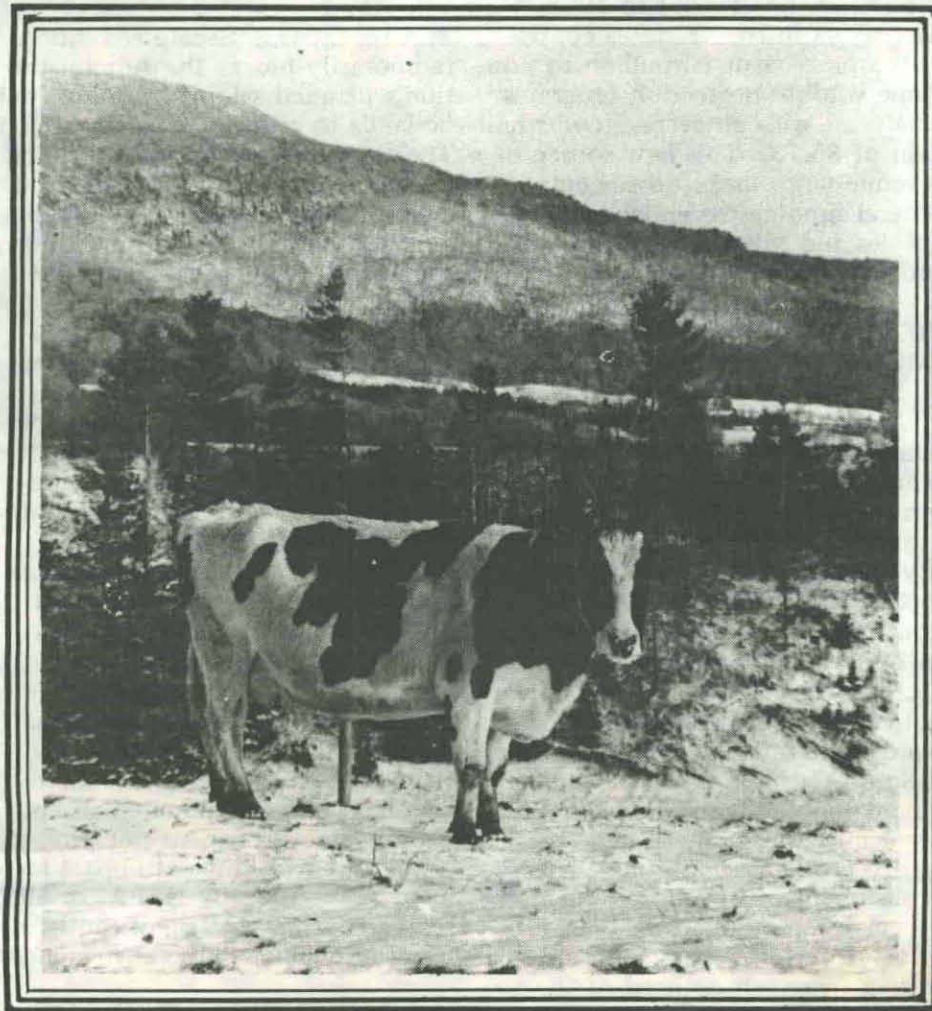
VNRc's

Vermont Environmental Report

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Vermont's Toughest Environmental Problem

Some would argue for acid rain, some for the energy crisis, and others for forestry management. But we think the health of our farms is Vermont's toughest environmental problem. Other problems are equally serious, but few are so resistant to solutions. We know that we can drastically reduce the sulfur and nitrogen oxide emissions that cause acid rain, we are on the way to comprehensive forest management planning, and there are a number of ways to meet our long-term energy requirements. But after wrestling with the agriculture issue for more than a decade, we're just beginning to understand the complexity of the problem, and solutions seem more remote than ever before.

Many Vermonters — and quite a few environmentalists — question whether farmland loss is really a problem. When federal Commodity Credit Corporation (CCC) warehouses are bursting with surplus milk and cheese, why wring our hands over the demise of a few economically-marginal Vermont dairy farms? And if farming isn't economically competitive with other uses of the land, why prop it up with conservation easements, tax relief or restrictive zoning?

Are we really interested in agriculture, or do we just like the pretty

patchwork of field and forest immortalized in the pages of *Vermont Life*? If open space is the issue, then a handful of strategically-placed "agricultural museums" secured by land trusts or purchase of development rights will fill the bill.

If we want to maintain farming as a way of life — as an important part of the economic and social fabric of our communities — or if we believe that Vermont's long-term economic health depends on producing more of our own food, then the path ahead of us is as slippery as a steep hill in a snowstorm. Revitalizing Vermont agriculture may well involve much more State intervention in the marketplace, and much more even-handed and consistent enforcement of the laws that are supposed to protect our most productive agricultural soils.

This issue of the *Vermont Environmental Report* takes a look at some of the successes and failures of these laws (pp. 1, 3 and 4), discusses a proposal for legislative reform (p. 4), finds out what farmers think about Vermont's vanishing farmland (p.8) and examines some of the underlying social problems (p.5). We hope this VER will light a fire under more than just the kindling in your woodstove!

The Prime of South Burlington and Act 250's Criterion 9(B)

On paper, Act 250's criterion 9(B) sounds like a tough, trend-setting land use law for the nation's most rural state. But application of the prime farmland criterion has been uneven and sometimes unfair. Pro-development district environmental commissions have ignored it, clever or influential developers have evaded it and neighboring landowners have sometimes abused it, hiding behind the "farmland conservation" issue when their true objections were purely aesthetic.

9(B) has been severely tested in the last year. Landmark cases in Chittenden county have chalked up some small successes, more failures and considerable abuse. All have demonstrated the futility of applying 9(B) on a site-by-site basis, without a statewide land use plan or permanent local agricultural zoning.

MITEL: THE CAMEL'S NOSE UNDER THE TENT

One of the built-in dilemmas of criterion 9(B) is that it is most likely to be invoked in areas where it is least likely to be enforced. Most of Vermont's prime farmland adjoins areas that are subject to intense development pressure — the Champlain Valley, the lower Connecticut River Valley — where the town fathers are bound to resist any device that permanently bans or restricts development.

The City of South Burlington has about 4000 acres of "good" to "excellent" soils in its "southeast quadrant" (south of I-89 and east of Spear Street), but the rest of the city has a typically suburban settlement pattern. Although population increased by only six per cent between 1970 and 1980, housing stock rose by nearly 39%. City planners expect continued growth and have zoned most of the southeast quadrant either "agricultural/rural residential" or "industrial/agricultural" (which means agriculture is the interim use).

In April of 1981, the Mitel Corporation, a Canadian-based semiconductor manufacturer, filed for an Act 250 permit to construct a 59,000-square-foot plant on 111 acres of land in the southeast quadrant just south of I-89. On June 19th — only 11 weeks later — Mitel received a permit from the District Four Environmental Commission.

Without ruling on whether or not the development involved primary agricultural soils, the District Commission found that the project "will not significantly reduce the

agricultural potential of the primary agricultural soils" because the applicant planned to "maximize the use of non-farmable areas." Mitel proposed to build on a ledgy knoll and to lease most of the remaining land to a selected farmer.

The Commission's decision stipulated that Mitel could withdraw any part of the land at any time, but noted that "witnesses for the applicant testified that there is no expansion presently planned at this site." On July 23rd, four days after the expiration of the 30-day appeal period, the Mitel Corporation filed for a 28,000-square-foot expansion.

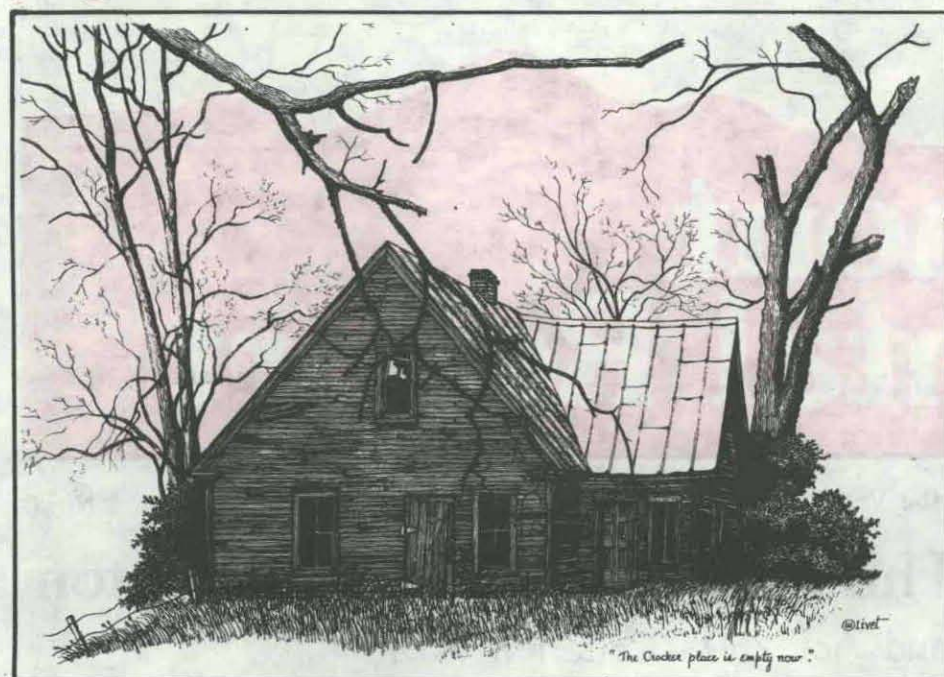
Many farmland advocates think the Mitel decision sealed the fate of farmland in the southeast quadrant. "As soon as Mitel pushed that sewer line under the highway, the land south of I-89 became extremely developable," says Ed Stanak, who was District Four Coordinator at the time.

Just last month, the Commission took the unprecedented step of partially reviewing, under criterion 9(B), a proposal to develop 328 acres known as "Green Acres," just south of the Mitel site. Based on "conceptual plans" showing various combinations of residential and industrial development and open space, the Commission concluded that "the applicant may realize a reasonable return on the fair market value of the land only by devoting some of the primary agricultural soils to uses which will significantly reduce their agricultural potential." But some of the land must be maintained for agricultural use.

THE SOUTH BURLINGTON AG. LAND USE POLICY: TOO LITTLE, TOO LATE

Both developments — Mitel and Green Acres — are compatible with South Burlington's recently-completed "Agricultural Land Use Policy." The Vermont Agriculture Department collaborated on the policy, which was intended to demonstrate how South Burlington could continue to expand while still preserving some large contiguous tracts of farmland. The City offered to create an agricultural district of some 2000 acres in the southeast quadrant between Spear Street and I-89 if the Agriculture Department would agree not to raise 9(B) in future Act 250 proceedings. "Only" two-thirds of the total usable land in this zone could be developed, with the balance to

(Continued on page 4)



"The Crocker Place is Empty Now" -- Illustration by William Olivet

OTTAUQUECHEE RECLASSIFICATION DECISION DUE

The Vermont Water Resources Board is expected to rule this month on a petition to reclassify part of the Ottauquechee River. Sherburne Fire District No. 1 has asked the Board to create a permanent "Class C" zone on the Ottauquechee so that it can discharge effluent from a proposed municipal sewage treatment plant.

Sherburne has been plagued for years with septic system failures near the Killington ski area. Soils on the mountain are too steep and too shallow for successful on-site systems. Five years ago, the town formed a fire district and sought federal funding for a municipal sewage treatment plant. The project has been approved by the State and is on a long waiting list for funding from the federal Municipal Sewage Treatment Plant Construction Grants program.

The Fire District already has State approval to discharge treated wastewater to the Ottauquechee, but only during the winter months; wastewater discharges are highest in the winter because of the skiing industry, but the river can also assimilate more wastes because of higher flows and oxygen levels. Now the Fire District wants a year-round Class C zone to eliminate the need for an expensive land application system for summer use.

FOREST SERVICE RELEASES SUGARBUSH SKI AREA STUDY

A few days before press time, the U.S. Forest Service released the first public draft of an environmental impact statement concerning a major expansion of the Sugarbush Valley Ski Area on National Forest lands. To no one's surprise, the Forest Service endorsed the ski area's plan to double its skier capacity and increase the size of its permit area by 90 acres. The federal agency says that the expansion "best provides for increased skiing opportunities for the regional skiing population, and sustained economic well-being for Sugarbush Valley, Inc., and the local economy in the face of changing economic conditions." While the study acknowledges that "development pressure could have severe impacts on rural character and land uses" in the Waitsfield-Fayston-Warren area, the USFS disclaims responsibility for adverse impacts on lands not owned or controlled by the U.S. Forest Service.

VNRC does not oppose the reclassification, but we argued at hearings before the Water Resources Board in October that a reclassification order should include several conditions to protect water quality in the Ottauquechee River:

- The Water Resources Department should continue to test water quality in the Ottauquechee after the plant is built to verify the Board's assumptions about the river's summertime assimilative capacity; and

- The Board should limit total discharges to the river to no more than 75% of its summertime assimilative capacity.

The Sherburne Fire District agreed to the 75% ceiling and also agreed that no additional users would be allowed to connect to the plant if it would push the peak summer discharge over 85% of the plant's capacity. The Council believes that maintaining this reserve -- both in the stream's assimilative capacity and the plant's treatment capacity -- will protect the Ottauquechee from further degradation even if Sherburne's summer business continues to increase. The Water Resources Board has requested a legal opinion from the Vermont Attorney General on whether it can attach conditions to a reclassification order. MM



VERMONT ENVIRONMENTAL REPORT

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The Vermont Environmental Report is published six times a year by the Vermont Natural Resources Council. The opinions expressed by VER contributors are not necessarily those of VNRC. Please address all correspondence regarding this publication to VER Editor, VNRC, 7 Main Street, Montpelier, Vermont 05602/ (802) 223-2328.

The Word from Washington

"WILDLIFE CHECKOFF" WINS CONVERTS

The Green Mountain State will have lots of company if this session of the Vermont General Assembly passes the non-game conservation bill tabled at the close of the 1981-1982 Biennium. 20 states have included a checkoff for wildlife on their tax returns since Colorado pioneered the concept in 1978. Taxpayers in twelve states contributed more than \$3 million to non-game wildlife protection programs this year, with an average contribution of \$5.73. This new source of revenue helps make up for cuts in federal funding for endangered species and other wildlife protection programs.

THE MORE THINGS CHANGE, THE MORE THEY STAY THE SAME

A man who once described environmentalists as "anti-producers who use NEPA [the National Environmental Policy Act] as a sword to stop growth in our society" took over November 5th as Acting Energy Secretary. Senate confirmation hearings will be held in December for Interior Undersecretary Donald Hodel, the nominated replacement for James Edwards who left DOE to administer a South Carolina medical school. Hodel was a staunch advocate of resolving "the financial and regulatory problems inhibiting the establishment of new power plants, especially nuclear power plants" at the Interior Department and during five years as head of the Bonneville Power Authority.

GET OUT THE TIN, THE BONDO, AND THE BOTTLED WATER

U.S. highways will be seasoned with more than 10 million tons of salt this winter. Though it keeps our roads clear of ice and snow, road salt pollutes water supplies and inflicts \$3 million a year in damage on cars and trucks.

Public works departments are experimenting with de-icers that don't have such adverse side effects, including CMA, a combination of calcium and magnesium acetates that nearly duplicates salt's de-icing properties. But with current methods of production, CMA is 7 to 25 times

more expensive than salt.

Rubber asphalt (a combination of rubber and asphalt) breaks ice under pressure. And a new substance called Verglimit helps melt ice directly. But paving highways with either one almost doubles the cost of the road surface.

SENATORS, ENVIRONMENTALISTS BLOCK PUBLIC LANDS SALE

A recent U.S. Senate resolution temporarily blocks the Administration's planned sale of "surplus" public lands to reduce the national debt. The Reagan budget calls for selling up to five per cent of federal lands (some 35 million acres) within the next five years. But an amendment sponsored by Senators James McClure (R-ID) and Dale Bumpers (D-AR) and tacked onto a resolution approved to keep the federal government running through mid-December requires that any properties slated for the auction block be inventoried and evaluated by congressional delegations and the states at least 30 days in advance.

Meanwhile, three environmental organizations -- the Conservation Law Foundation of New England, the Natural Resources Defense Council and the National Wildlife Federation -- have filed suit to halt the land disposal program. They claim that the Reagan Administration has neither conducted an environmental assessment nor prepared an environmental impact statement as required by NEPA for all federal actions that significantly affect the quality of the environment.

NH/VT PROJECT GETS CONGRESSIONAL NOD

The New Hampshire/Vermont Solid Waste Compact was signed into law in early October. The law provides for the construction of an electricity-producing trash incinerator which will process waste from three counties in southern Vermont and New Hampshire. The facility, which is scheduled to begin operating in 1985, will produce 12.5 million kilowatt-hours of electricity annually and will reduce the volume of existing landfill waste by 80%.

Some material for this column comes from a press packet prepared by the National Wildlife Federation.

Calendar

Monday, December 20, 10-12 a.m.

VNRC's Energy Committee will discuss the Vermont State Electric Power Plan at the Conference Room at our offices in the Old Train Depot at 7 Main Street in Montpelier. These meetings are open to all members.

Thursday, December 16, 7:30 p.m.

VNRC Editor Marion MacDonald will speak to the Mad River Valley Audubon Society at Founders' Hall in Waitsfield.

Tuesday, December 28, 7:30 p.m.

Sally Laughlin will present a special family Christmas program on "Owls of Vermont" at the Ver-

mont Institute of Natural Science.

The program will feature several species of live owls who are permanent residents at VINS. Fee: \$2.00 for members, \$2.50 for non-members, \$1.00 for students and children. For more information, call 457-2779.

Tuesday, January 11, 9:30 - 3:30

VNRC's Board of Directors meets at 27 Bailey Avenue in Montpelier.

Thursday, January 13, 7:00-9:00

The Vermont Environmental Caucus will meet in VNRC's Conference Room to discuss the upcoming session of the Vermont General Assembly.

Corn or Kilowatts? The Saxtons River Project

Judy Munger

When are Vermont's regulations protecting prime farmland least effective? When they are totally ignored by the agencies responsible for enforcing them. This happened in the case of the proposed Saxtons River hydroelectric plant, proving that prime farmland may be lost just as easily through the PSB's "Section 248" as it is through Act 250's "10-acre loophole."

The BSR Company (Norman Silberdick, Stewart Reed and David Buckley) wants to dam the Saxtons River at the Rockingham-Westminster line and build a 1.5-megawatt hydroelectric plant. The impoundment would inundate the entire 90-acre Basin Farm, almost all of which is prime farmland.

The Saxtons River project already has a permit from the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission (FERC), and this past July, the Vermont Public Service Board (PSB) approved its request for a "Certificate of Public Good" (under Section 248). But Vermont Agriculture Department officials claim that the PSB failed to consider the agricultural impacts of the project as required under 10 VSA 1086 and Executive Order 52.

In its July 21 opinion, the Board explained that "the need to develop a renewable resource energy source such as the proposed project outweighs the negative results of the loss of some prime agricultural land."

But according to Bob Wagner, a land use planner and consultant for the Agriculture Department, there is no hard data either in the Board's findings or in the testimony on which they were based to support this claim. "I think the PSB hearing examiner assumed that any project that involves a renewable source of energy is in the public good," he says.

Wagner says his Department isn't against hydro power, but feels that sites with less severe ag-

ricultural impacts should be developed first. "These prime river bottom soils are the most productive in the state," says Wagner. Until BSR purchased the Basin Farm, two men from Charlestown, New Hampshire commuted 10 miles each way to farm it. The land most recently produced 6½ tons per acre of high moisture ear corn (4-5 tons is the typical Vermont yield).

Norman Silberdick, one of the developers, points out that the energy project would provide a recreational lake for the community, increase local property values and produce enough electricity for 750 homes. But Wagner calls that amount a "drop in the bucket" since it represents only 17/100 of a percent of last winter's peak electrical demand.

There could be other environmental problems with the Saxtons River project. Tom Willard of the Water Resources Department says tests show the lake will be "mesoeutrophic to eutrophic" (green with algae and undesirable for recreation). Area residents are concerned about whether there will be enough water, since the river practically runs dry in the summer. Prentice Hammond, a Rockingham selectman, summed up his feelings in a telephone interview: "The towns (Rockingham, Westminster and Bellows Falls Village) should have spent more time and money studying the project. I'm afraid it's going to be a stinking frog pond."

Other concerns are bank erosion, sediment loading behind the dam, algal blooms, lowered dissolved oxygen content and inundation of a pair of scenic waterfalls.

Even Public Service Department Commissioner Richard Saudek is now "lukewarm" about the Saxtons River project. Construction costs have escalated from \$3.7 million to \$6 million in a year-and-a-half, pushing the cost of the power to 18 cents per kilowatt-hour. Among the conditions attached to

BSR's "Certificate of Public Good" are that the developers must obtain secure financing and a 20-year contract for purchase of electricity.

There is some question, however, as to whether BSR must comply with these conditions before construction may begin. In a recent confrontation between federal and state powers over the Black River hydroelectric plant in Springfield, Vermont, U.S. District Judge James Holden ruled that FERC—not the Vermont Public Service Board—has jurisdiction. But FERC's right to supercede state wishes is being challenged in a test case concerning the Chace Mill hydroelectric project in Burlington.

Despite the laws protecting Vermont's prime agricultural lands, the Saxtons River hydroelectric project has cleared all the State and federal regulatory hurdles. Money seems to be the only remaining obstacle. BSR has preliminary approval from the Vermont Industrial Development Authority to finance the project with \$3.7 million in State-issued tax exempt bonds. The Agricul-

tural Lands Review Board met this fall to determine if this conforms to Governor Snelling's Executive Order 52, which directs State agencies to "assure that... development requiring state permits will not eliminate or... jeopardize the continuation of agriculture." But the Board adjourned without making a recommendation to the Governor.

Should the State of Vermont subsidize a development that takes 90 acres of prime farmland out of production? 90 acres may seem like a "drop in the bucket," but only 20% of Vermont's land contains primary agricultural soils. If we're serious about growing more of our own food, we should enforce the laws designed to protect our best soils. And we certainly shouldn't offer a reward in the form of a State-subsidized loan to developers who convert prime farmland to non-agricultural uses.

Judy Munger is a VNRC intern and a graduate student at Antioch/ New England.



Photo by Judy Munger

FROM EXECUTIVE ORDER 52:

"I, Richard Snelling... direct the state agencies... to establish policies... to assure that... development requiring state permits will not eliminate or significantly interfere with or jeopardize the continuation of agriculture on productive agricultural lands or reduce the agricultural potential on primary agricultural soils unless there is no feasible and prudent alternative and the facility or service has been planned to minimize its effect on such lands."

FROM 10 VSA 1086:

"In determining whether the public good shall be served thereby, the state agency having jurisdiction shall give due consideration among other things to the quantity, kind and extent of cultivated agricultural land that may be flooded or rendered unfit for use by a proposed project and in such consideration it shall view such problems from both the long-range agricultural land use viewpoint as well as from the immediate taking of agricultural lands that may be involved."

Green Mt. Produce Goes Under

Don Hooper

Sadly, after more than a year of actively looking for investors to provide additional working capital, Green Mountain Produce, a Vermont produce and food products wholesaler, was forced to shut down. The GMP story is a fascinating and discouraging one. The Company's demise is a blow to the distribution and marketing component so essential to diversified agriculture in Vermont.

GMP began modestly five years ago when owner Jake Blum drove his pickup once a week to Boston to purchase California-grown organic vegetables for his natural foods store in Barre. Before long, Blum decided that, rather than travelling empty to Boston, he'd take some good Vermont products — Vermont cheddar, maple syrup, goats' milk — down to the city to distribute to his retail counterparts there. Then he'd load up with January tomatoes, organic rutabagas and exotic what-have-you flown in from California to bring back to his Vermont customers.

In its five-year ascent, the busi-

ness grew from a few-thousand-dollar operation to almost a million in gross sales as Blum added customers and products. By this Fall, he was distributing foodstuffs from more than 40 Vermont producers — everything from Green Mountain-grown vegetables to Vermont pasta. This year his southern New England buyers numbered nearly 200.

But, in spite of dramatic cost-cutting and organizational tightening, Blum had severe cash flow problems. He was often unable to fill his orders because he couldn't procure the necessary inventory. To make his truck payments, payroll and other operating expenses, which increased as he expanded to reach a profitable economy of scale, Blum needed working capital — more investment or a sizable low-interest loan for a business which operated on a small margin. He couldn't find it. Eventually, saddled with high-interest debts, he had to call it quits.

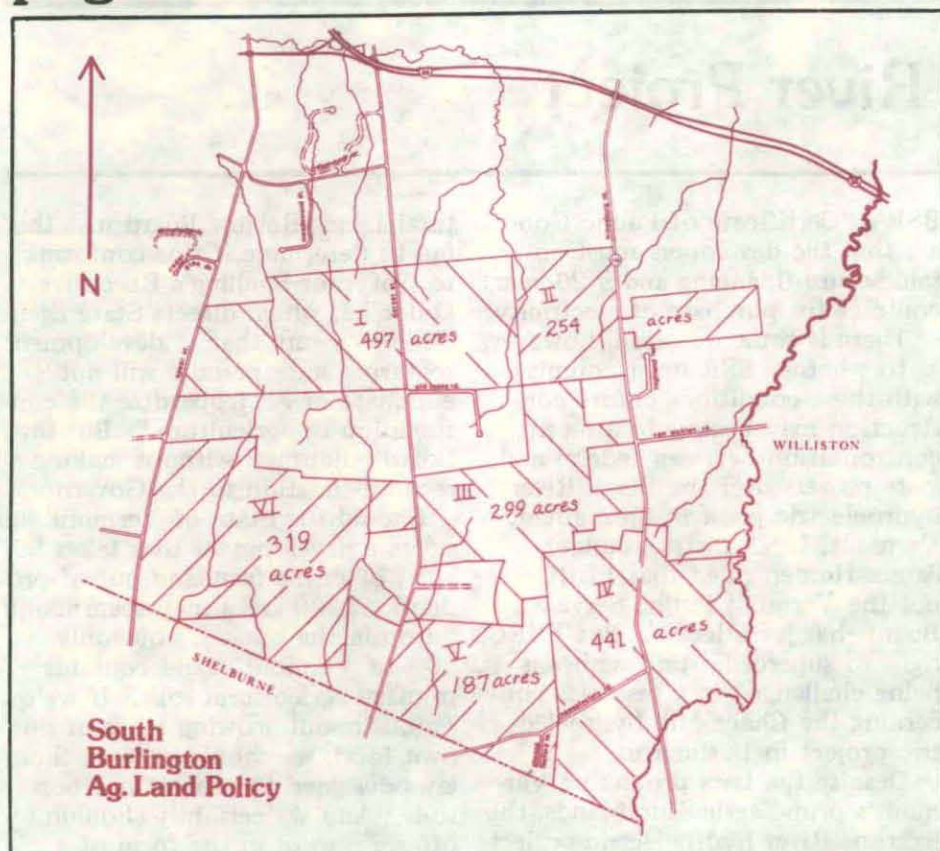
In addition to the 15 employees who lost their jobs when the company folded, a host of small Ver-

mont producers lost their wholesale outlet and also lost money they were owed for goods which GMP had bought but not been able to pay for.

Green Mountain Produce is a case study in the economics of marketing and distribution. I hope we can learn from it. At a minimum, the GMP story should help de-mythologize the notion that all we need to do is diversify our agriculture and the stuff will sell itself. GMP is as good an argument for additional State emphasis and help in market development and capital assistance as any I can think of.

TOWN ENERGY PLANNERS!

The Center for Rural Studies and the Vermont Agency of Development and Community Affairs have just published a two-part energy planning handbook for towns describing the range of issues that can be addressed at the local level with step-by-step instructions for specific projects. To obtain a copy, write the Center for Rural Studies, UVM, Burlington, VT.



South Burlington

(Continued from page 1)
be preserved for open space and agriculture.

The policy has many critics, including VNRC Acting Executive Director Don Hooper, who points out that the plan would preserve only 650 - 700 acres of farmland, and these parcels may prove too small, too fragmented and too far from vital support services for sustainable agricultural use. Hooper also contends that if the City of South Burlington were serious about preserving farmland, it would offer the development rights to a land trust. "As long as the City holds the rights to this land, it will be under continued pressure," says the VNRC chief. "Five years down the road, a new City Council could reverse its earlier pledges."

"A lot of people didn't like our percentages," says David Spitz, South Burlington planner. Spitz concedes that the City Council, which approved the policy in principle last July, "didn't really do it to save agriculture," but because they saw it as a way to "get the State off their backs."

On the plus-side, the South Burlington plan was a significant first step in the direction of comprehensive farmland planning at the local level — an essential ingredient in any successful farmland protection strategy.

SPEAR STREET: THE RIGHT DECISION, THE WRONG SITE

The Vermont State Environmental Board thoroughly kiboshed the South Burlington Agricultural Land Use Policy two months ago when it overturned a District Commission decision concerning a housing development on Spear Street. The District Four Commission had approved the construction of 79 condominiums and the creation of a 55-lot subdivision on 51 acres west of Spear Street — outside the southeast quadrant and within the boundaries of a medium-density rural residential zone (four units per acre).

A coalition of neighboring land-owners known as "Spear Street Associates" successfully appealed to the Environmental Board on criterion 9(B), even though many observers, including Agriculture Department Land Use Consultant Bob Wagner, contend that the

group "has no real interest in agriculture."

In a 17-page decision, the Board ruled that at least part of the site contains primary agricultural soils, that the proposed development would significantly reduce the agricultural potential of these soils, and that it was not planned to minimize agricultural impact. The decision also spells out, step by step, how 9(B) should be applied in District Environmental Commission decisions.

Wagner calls the Board's decision a "mixed blessing." "I'm glad the Environmental Board laid out how 9(B) should work," he says, "but it's unfortunate that it happened with this case. I think it gives the wrong signals to developers."

David Spitz concurs. "If our approach towards agricultural zoning isn't good enough, let's find one that is," he says. "In the present situation, everyone hangs, because you never know which way the wind's going to blow."

Is there any hope of preserving substantial, contiguous, economically-viable farms in rapidly-growing communities like South Burlington? David Spitz says, "the regulatory approach is not appropriate in areas where development pressures are so great," and it's hard to disagree. When the development value of land is five to ten times its agricultural value, the rules will be bent. Maybe we should concentrate on protecting land in Franklin or Addison counties, where farming is still economically competitive with other uses of the land.

On the other hand, if we want to protect our ability to grow more of our own food, we'll have to limit development on that 10 to 20% of Vermont's land that contains primary agricultural soils. And most of that prime farmland adjoins high-growth areas like the City of South Burlington.

Preserving sustainable agriculture in Vermont means making some tough choices. But as Frank Bryan says elsewhere in this issue, "you can't preserve it unless you need it for something." Maybe it's time to figure out just how much Vermont agriculture is worth to us and to decide whether or not we're willing to limit residential and industrial growth in order to protect it. MM

Farmink

Don Hooper

In the September/October "Farmink" column I made a quick initial assessment of the main ingredients of the farmland protection package being put together by the Vermont Department of Agriculture's Aglands Task Force. I was a member of the 10-member Technical Team that did the legwork for the Task Force.

The full forty-member Task Force met November 29 in the State House and endorsed the Technical Team's recommendations for legislation that would require or at least strongly encourage towns to develop local farmland protection plans. Whether the townspeople will approve the plans, or whether any farmers sign up for whatever protection schemes are proposed is another matter. But if the legislature acts on the Task Force recommendations and amends Chapter 117, Title 10 of the Vermont Planning & Development Act, local farmland protection planning — not necessarily implementation — will be mandatory.

There was less unanimity, however, concerning the logistics, costs, and fine points of the incentives that would encourage farmers to subscribe to local farmland plans once they are developed: many of the incentives in the package seem too weak to have much appeal to farmers, particularly considering the cost/price squeeze dairymen are facing; some of the incentives are potentially expensive, making their adoption right now by the State unlikely; and town planning, whatever its merits, often fails to address legitimate justice, equity and compensation issues for land-owners. Current use taxation, low interest VIDA-type agricultural loans, priority consideration for a variety of existing, but increasingly under-funded, federal agricultural programs were among the incentives discussed. While agreeing that a revolving state emergency loan fund for the purchase of farmland development rights seemed desirable, the Task Force debated whether the money should be available only for the protection of Vermont's most important agricultural soils. The Task Force also discussed at length whether farmers who received differential tax assessments, priority treatment for existing programs or other possible benefits would put their neighbors at a competitive disadvantage.

The question of whether farmers could be guaranteed fair representation on local or regional planning commissions or on the State Agricultural Lands Protection Board went round and round. Finally, farmer and veteran legislator Keith Wallace spoke in defense of the Ag Department's attempt to get more farmers out to Task Force meetings. "Farmers have been invited to participate in developing these plans — and often we've been too busy to attend the meetings." Then with his inimitable light touch, Wallace laid to rest any illusion that farmers all speak with one voice. "And, even when you get three farmers out to a meeting, you'll likely get three different opinions." MacDonald Miller, chicken farmer and legislator, seconded Wallace's opinion: "No, three farmers, four different opin-

ions." Before the laughter had subsided, lame-duck State Senator Seeley Reynolds, who mounted the only filibuster of the day, tipped his hand by quipping, "That's why I want more farmers on these committees: they'd never meet, and even if they did, they'd never agree on anything." Although there were a number of abstentions later when a vote was taken on whether the Task Force recommendations were on the right track, Reynolds was the only one to vote a flat "no" to the proposals.

State Senator Scudder Parker assessed the odds that the package would find its way into legislation in the 1983 General Assembly. "This is actually a series of proposals, rather than a single, tightly-wrapped package. I don't see it (the package) going through 'bang' — even without Seeley there!" Parker went on to agree with Dunsmore that it may pass piecemeal, by increments, over successive legislative sessions. "Some of the good parts can be introduced and adopted quickly and cheaply, such as the town agricultural planning provisions. Other aspects, such as the more costly incentives will require refinement and more consideration (in later sessions)," was Parker's assessment.

BACK TO SQUARE ONE FOR JEFFORDS PROPOSAL

After considerable optimism in September, there now appears little hope that several Vermont-sponsored amendments to the Consolidated Farm and Rural Development Act will pass in the twilight of the 97th Congress.

If passed, amendments introduced by Vermont Representative James Jeffords and Senator Patrick Leahy would have been the latest in a series of successful initiatives by the Vermont delegation to protect the nation's capacity for future food production. Under one of Jefford's amendments, when the Farmers Home Administration forecloses on a farm loan, the FmHA would be required to make a good faith effort to find another farm buyer who would keep the land in production.

The Agency would have to hold onto the land for two years, during which time it could only be sold to someone planning to use it for agriculture. If no farm purchaser were found during that time, it could then be offered to a non-profit land trust or a state or local agency.

Only after those efforts were exhausted could the land be sold to the highest bidder for non-agricultural purposes. That is presently — unfortunately — the initial step FmHA takes in its foreclosures.

This amendment, and other strengthening provisions, now repose in the Senate Agriculture Committee where Senator Jesse Helms will let them die. Back to square one in the 98th Congress.

Don Hooper is the Acting Executive Director of the Vermont Natural Resources Council.



"System" Life versus "Community" Life

An Interview with Frank Bryan

The decline of Vermont agriculture is one of this state's most serious environmental problems. It is also, some scholars argue, a symptom of deeper social and economic problems. Frank Bryan, Assistant Professor of Political Science at the University of Vermont, claims that we are losing "Vermont the home place" because we have embraced "system life" instead of "life in human-scale communities."

"We are making life in the countryside palatable in spite of the land, in spite of the seasons, in spite of the temperature," he said in an article in the Fall issue of Vermont magazine. "We have used the technologies of the valleys to protect us from the realities of the hills, to spin ourselves a technological cocoon and preserve a 68° life-style. Vermonters of the past lived with the land. Today we are more and more simply living on it."

I interviewed Bryan last month at his office at UVM's Social Science Research Center in Burlington:

MM: "You titled your recent article in *Vermont* magazine, 'The Lonely Villagers.' What is a 'lonely villager?'"

FB: "I borrowed that from David Riesman's *Lonely Crowd*. He was talking about being lonely in the city because technology had separated neighbor from neighbor. You don't know who lives in the apartment next door, and you see so many people every day that you build up 'psychic buffers' to being friendly and open. I see the same thing happening in rural areas -- technology separating you from your neighbor, making it possible for you to live in the countryside but not to have to know your neighbor. You don't need neighbors for economic reasons, you don't need them for social reasons. So you get encased in your own technology in rural areas, and that makes you lonely."

MM: "What kind of technology is isolating neighbor from neighbor?"

FB: "The technology that allows you to move long distances with ease -- communications technology, self-sufficiency technology -- the fact that I can live in Starksboro, work at UVM and take my kids to daycare in Essex Junction. The technology we have today is designed for individuals to survive without neighbors. Nothing is linked to people nearby us. I'd rather see small-scale communal types of technology, so that you really needed your neighbor for something."

MM: "Does this mean I have to throw away my tape recorder?"

FB: "No. I'm not against technology. I think we can democratize technology, bring it down to our own scale and gain control of it. The best example of this is the computer. The computer used to be a centered system. Now you can sit at home and operate it. The next phase of technology, I think, will be a personal technology."

MM: "What are some other technologies that should be democratized?"

FB: "Energy. Instead of big, centralized power plants, we should have small community power sys-

tems -- using very high technology, I guess."

MM: "Do you think we should accept some of the economic and environmental trade-offs of small-scale hydro, wind or wood energy because having control of the power source locally would make people more familiar with how power is produced and distributed?"

FB: "Yes. You've got to see yourself in your work. Basic human happiness comes through understanding one's relationship to the world and the universe. And more and more of the kinds of technology we have now estrange us from what we know about what makes us live the way we do. Why don't we simply say that we're not going to sell out to some huge international power complex and just see what happens? It would take a certain amount of courage and faith that we could find a better way. But the other way might be a way that involves more human understanding and human-scale development. We're going to have to break away from that slavish attachment to trend lines and projections, as if we had no ability to affect the future. Who would have thought 20 years ago that we'd all be burning wood again? No one could have predicted that."

MM: "In your article, you talked about two things that are contributing to the loneliness of rural life -- technology and the ethic of perfection. What do you mean by the 'ethic of perfection?'"

FB: "That comes from Jacques Ellul's work, *The Technological Society*. He says that the driving force of modern man is the search for perfection in all things, and by 'perfection' he also means 'symmetry.' I think an awful lot of the centralization ethic that has destroyed the small Vermont town has been no more than a blind drive for symmetry and perfection in administration. I'd rather see a situation where we have many local varied ways to do things -- many of them imperfect -- and in that variety we'd make progress over time."

MM: "You say 'willingness to give up community life in favor of system life is a basic ecological insult, outdistancing in its implications for the countryside many more visible environmental travesties such as billboards or even dirty lakes or streams.' Why?"

FB: "Vermont is ecologically small-

"Vermonters of the past lived with the land; today we are more and more simply living on it."

town. The topography and geography of the land make it a natural setting for small, decentralized communities. Breaking those up -- joining five or six towns together where each town has its own little school and making one big school -- to me is an ecological insult. It insults man's natural tendency to have a nest and a place and a territory."

"I think a lot of the people who have come to Vermont came looking for something small -- they wanted to go back to human-scale life. But after they've lived here awhile, they start thinking they can have their cake and eat it, too. They come here to live, and then decide they'd really like to keep their salaries, so they start doing some consulting and then some commuting. They come up here because they like the quaint, pastoral character of Vermont, but then they vote in zoning to keep the poor redneck across the street from putting in a trailer. This kind of zoning represents the 'system' mentality; we want our little villages to look like a Currier and Ives print. I see so much of Vermont as just cosmetic, and the people who are committed to making it look like a postcard are on awfully thin ecological ice. If you suddenly cut off the techno-systems, a lot of these big, beautiful country homes would wither and die within weeks. They simply don't have a linkage to the soil, to the environment, to the seasons -- they aren't linked to their surroundings, either socially or economically."

MM: "What do you mean by 'linkage to the soil?' Does that mean we all have to grow our own vegetables?"

FB: "Something like that. I don't think it makes any sense to buy 10 acres of Vermont land, put a fence around it and isolate it from other people, and then not use it. You're really not going to appreciate it or be able to save it unless you need

it for something."

MM: "Here's a tougher case for applying your philosophy. How about Governor Snelling's proposal that Act 250 be administered by the towns? Although this appears to fit in with the philosophy of encouraging small-scale, self-sufficient communities, I suspect many towns, in an effort to boost local tax revenues, would sell out as quickly as possible to strip development and regional shopping malls, and that wouldn't necessarily promote more self-sufficiency in the community."

FB: "You're absolutely right. Theoretically I'm for it. It's the townspeople's right to live in the environment they choose, and I have great implicit faith in people making the right decision. My problem comes with allowing bad things to happen on a mass scale before the educational process has worked, before people are confident about their ability not to have to sell out. On balance, I'd have to say, 'yeah, go ahead and do it,' but with great trepidation."

MM: "What if the town approves a nuclear waste dump?"

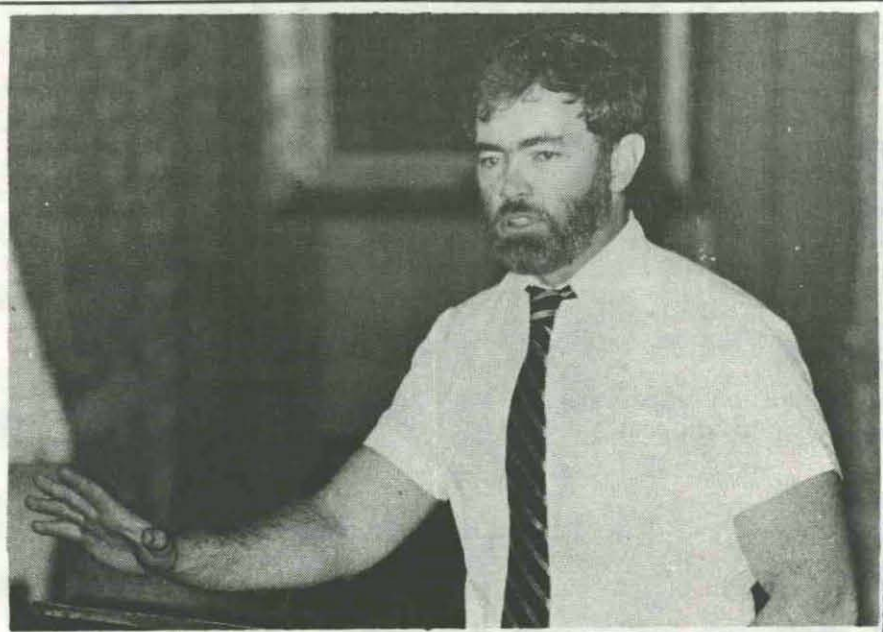
FB: "Some towns would do that. They'd say, 'sure, dump it in our town if it will increase the tax base.' And on that issue, I'd say, 'don't give them the power,' because it so affects the total environment. Environmental protection is one of the things you don't decentralize. You can't stop acid rain at the local level, so it isn't too much of a contradiction to say that's one issue no town ought to be able to decide."

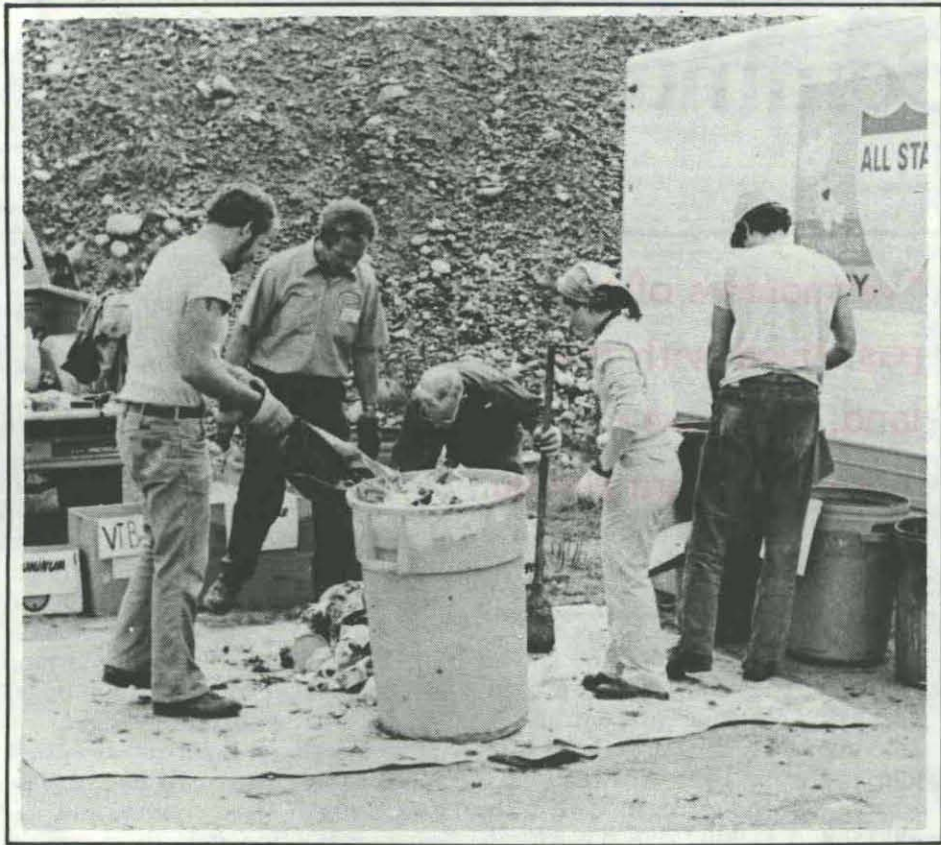
"Now on the Snelling plan, I don't know all the details, but I would say, on balance, if Vermont wants to protect itself, it will do it in little groups of people, too. There are good people everywhere, there are protectionists everywhere. I certainly will argue this, that if we allow centralism and one hierarchical elite to make all the decisions, we're going to have a much less diverse, much less innovative, much less exciting environment."

*Frank Bryan grew up in Newbury, Vermont, and was educated at St. Michael's College, the University of Vermont and the University of Connecticut. He's an Assistant Professor of Political Science at UVM and the author of *Yankee Politics in Vermont and Politics in the Rural States*.*

"The technology we have today is designed for individuals to survive without neighbors. Nothing is linked to people nearby us."

Frank Bryan





We Are What We Throw Away

(or: "Down in the Dumps with the Association of Vermont Recyclers")

Members and friends of the Association of Vermont Recyclers spent some of their Saturdays this Fall sifting through trash at the Brattleboro and Hinesburg landfills. The recyclers weren't looking for buried treasure, but for a profile of "the average Vermonter's garbage" and an estimate of how much of it could be recycled.

What they found, in addition to well-worn sneakers, Instamatic cameras and lots of used kitty litter, was that an amazing 95% of typical Vermont trash could be salvaged for some other use. Newspapers, glass and aluminum comprised 24% of the trash from Westminister and 16% of the trash in Hinesburg. Most of the remaining refuse (71% and 78.5%, respectively) consisted of compostable matter such as leaves and food wastes and combustible materials such as waste paper and rags which could fuel an electricity-producing trash incinerator.

Only five per cent of the "average Vermonter's garbage -- mostly steel cans and dirt -- has no current value. Even steel cans are recyclable in theory, but right now there is no demand for scrap steel because of the slump in the automobile industry.

State Resource Recovery and Recycling Specialist Andy Rouleau says the people in Hinesburg and Westminister could reduce their waste stream by 20% or more "right now, without any new programs or initiatives" simply by cashing in their redeemable beverage containers, bundling their newspapers and taking them to local recycling facilities and composting or tilling under their garden and food wastes. Rouleau said compostable wastes alone accounted for 18% of Westminister's waste, and "If it's put back into the garden, it saves fertilizer and saves space at the landfill." The towns could cut back another 12 to 18% "with a minimal amount of initiative" by establishing local glass and aluminum recycling centers.

The Association of Vermont Recyclers promotes recycling and waste reduction through consumer education, legislative lobbying and seeking out new markets for salvage materials. If you'd like to join AVR* and receive its quarterly newsletter, *Out of the Dumps*, call or write Connie Howe, R1, Box 252, Middlebury, Vermont 05753, (802) 388-3220. MM

*An individual membership is \$5.

Results of the "Refuse Reviews"

	Brattleboro		Hinesburg	
	Weight (lb.)	%	Weight (lb.)	%
Newspapers	44	5.5	26	4.1
Glass	140	17.0	72	11.4
Aluminum foil & cans	9.25	1.0	4	.6
Returnable cans and bottles	28 bottles, 37 cans		none!	
Non-returnable cans and bottles	63 bottles, 67 cans		5 cans	
Combustible organics (including compost)	569	71.0	496	78.5
Other	39	5.0	34	5.4
Total weight	800 pounds		632 pounds	

VNRC Forest Policy Statement

We printed a few excerpts from VNRC's Forest Policy Statement in the last VER, but we've had enough requests for more information that we've decided to run the full text of the statement in this issue. Our Forest Policy Committee drafted this statement, which was approved by the VNRC Board of Directors at its August 9th meeting:

Vermont is a forested state. Woodlands are the essence of our landscape and are a significant renewable resource that provides economic value and adds to the quality of our lives. Long term management based on the principles of sound husbandry and fundamental environmental protection is essential to protect Vermont's landscape, the sustained production of fiber and fuel, wildlife habitat and water resources.

Woodland management should be guided by a comprehensive forest land resource policy and plan, developed with citizen participation and full cooperation of forest-related industries and government agencies. The goal should be a broad plan for executive action, legislative programs and public and private investment based on a thorough and continuing assessment of the forest resource as it relates to the needs of the people.

Such a forest plan must address such vital issues as prime land protection, energy policy, protection of air and water quality and wildlife habitat, land use planning and taxation, and the differing roles of private and public lands. Responsible forest management must reflect and intermesh with sound social, economic and environmental policy, and should be built on an ethic of stewardship.

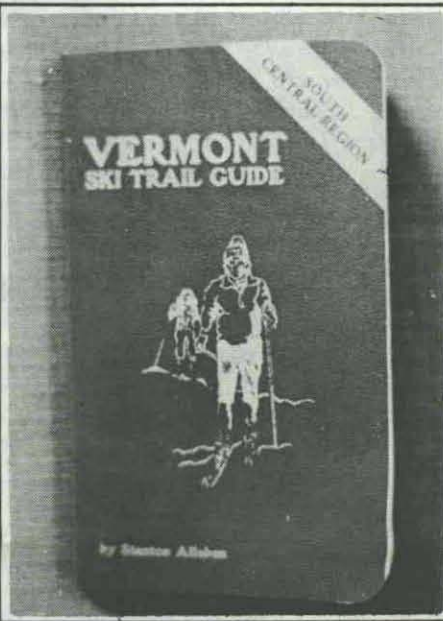
The Vermont Natural Resources Council supports a sound forest resource use policy and plan that is responsive to the following principles:

- emphasis on timber management for the continuous production of high quality hardwoods and softwoods favoring trees such as pine, maple, birch and ash that are the particular pride of Vermont's forests. Management for this goal will tend to foster stability of employment in the wood-using industries and will maximize the manufactured value of forest products;
- the substantial portion of Vermont's standing timber that is unsuitable for high-quality logs is a very valuable renewable native energy source. Its use ought to be at a sustainable rate and ought to reflect a commitment to an orderly transition to a stable energy future based on orderly growth, conservation and the use of renewable energy resources;
- the interest of protecting present and future supplies of potable water requires that forest management give constant and primary consideration to the conservation of forested watersheds;
- the management of forest habitat always balance timber and wildlife considerations and recognize both the game and non-game values of wildlife;
- forest management for recreation recognizes and respects not only its monetary value but its un-

priced and priceless values as well;

- Vermont's unique natural areas, wilderness tracts and endangered species are a bequest to the future and forest management will ensure their preservation.

The Vermont Natural Resources Council recognizes that the application of these principles is, in large measure, dependent on public and private educational programs, research and assistance directed to management of private woodlands. VNRC is committed to a continuing program of education and is working to gain public support for the policies outlined in this statement. The Council's charter authorizes it to initiate and participate in such programs as well as to monitor public agencies affecting resource management.



VERMONT SKI TRAIL GUIDE

Stan Allaben, a former member of the VNRC Board, has written a great little guide to cross-country ski trails in south-central Vermont. The *Vermont Ski Trail Guide: South Central Region* uses a back-packable *Long Trail Guide* format and gives you all the goods on access, difficulty and length of trails in northern Bennington and Windham and southern Windsor counties, including some ambitious treks in the Lye Brook Wilderness Area. Those who'd rather not stray too far from the hearth will also find a smattering of local history and descriptions of nearby watering holes in the *Vermont Ski Trail Guide*. And last but not least, Allaben will donate \$1.00 to VNRC for each copy sold if you send him your order on the form below!

Please send me _____ copies of the *Vermont Ski Trail Guide* at \$4.50 per copy, plus 50¢ postage and handling for each copy. Total enclosed _____

Name _____

Address _____

City _____

State _____ Zip _____

Stanton Allaben Productions
Little Pond Road
Londonderry, Vermont 05148

The Council

DOES VERMONT NEED MORE WILDERNESS?

VNRC's Land Use Committee would like to hear members' views about a proposal to create an additional 63,000 acres of wilderness in Vermont. The Vermont Wilderness Association and several other VNRC member organizations have asked the Council to support national legislation to set aside four areas: "Big Branch" (including Devil's Den, Wilder Mountain and Griffith Lake), "Skylight" (the area around Breadloaf Mountain in Ripton), a section in Woodford, and a 1500-acre addition to the Lye Brook Wilderness Area southeast of Manchester.

The U.S. Forest Service considered all four areas for wilderness classification under RARE II (Roadless Area Review and Evaluation), but only Devil's Den and Breadloaf were selected for "further planning." Vermont's Congressional delegation can propose new areas for wilderness designation at any time, however, and the Wilderness Association hopes they'll draft a bill including all the RARE II areas plus some consolidations and boundary adjustments.

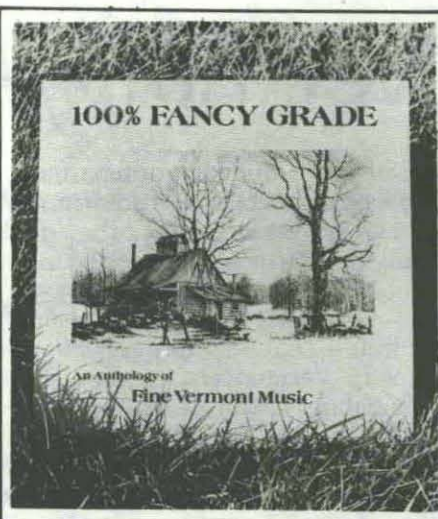
"We need to preserve a reasonable amount of land in as natural a state as possible," says Lowell Krassner, a spokesman for the Association, "and wilderness is the most natural state land can be left in." Krassner thinks more wilderness might help re-establish loons, martens, osprey, falcons and other species in Vermont.

Some outdoorsmen oppose the expansion, arguing that the wilderness designation closes land to access roads, motorized traffic (including snowmobiles), logging activities and habitat manipulation. It may also exclude the popular hikers' shelters on the Long and Appalachian Trails. And, while 63,000 acres does not seem especially large, it represents one percent of all the land in Vermont and 20% of the Green Mountain National Forest.

If you'd like to comment on the wilderness proposal, write to Larry Forcier, Chairman, VNRC Land Use Committee, c/o VNRC, 7 Main Street, Montpelier, Vermont 05602. MM

New Members

We're pleased to welcome the following new members, who joined us in September and October: Marge Jewell; Robert S. Gillette; Nancy Hinsdale; H.K. Wright; C. Kenneth Dean; Susan Shedd; Mark & Ellen Shedd; J.M. Boucher; William Fadden; Doris H. Grice; Roland E. Wagner & Son; Page & Ardith Fenton; Rachel & Albert Shulman; Dean Applefield; Howard Wilson; Richard W. Carbin; Rudolph Behrendt; Julie Levy; Peter & Katherine Hall; Phebe Titus; Walter Bothfield & Sons; Charles A. Woodard; Edward Gray; Rhoda Hopkins; Carlton Greenwood; Robert & Nancy Foster; Real Ouimet; James F. Herrick, III; E. Ernest Ralph; Bert & Bonnie Dodson; Susan B. Clark; John Hayes; Nancy Knox; Alfred Jerger; H. Edmund Wilcox; Alan F. Cooper; Albert Turner; Michael J. O'Connor Family; Brett Hulse; Dean Pierce; David Russell; Melvin Grow; Ann & Gordon Ketterer; Frances J. Hammond; Patrick Lajoie; Elisa & Kevin Klose; Judith Gellert; Roger Allen; Harry Miller; Robert & Carolyn H. Jones; Ames Hill, Marlboro Community Center; The Putney School; Mary Ellen Linton; Ellis L. Phillips, Jr.; Dover Ford; Robert Wanner; Harold & Kathryn Stone; Dolores L. Kuhn; Paul K. Garrett; Lance A. Llewellyn; Smokey House Project; Jean Gilman; Lawrence Sherwood; Timothy F. McKay; Susan Cleary; Elizabeth Cameron; Alan Johnson & Dorothy Aicher; Ann & Tim O'Dell; Beth Humstone and Reg Gignoux; Howard Peterson; Land of Odds/Jack Linn; Marylou Lamphere; John P. McWilliams, Jr.; Andrew M. Rockefeller; James S. McBean; Richard & Diane Kerr; Bill Paine; John Fitzgerald; Paul Benjamin; Marjorie W. Weil; Scott Warthin; Dennis & Sharon Borchardt; Margaret Johnston; Ruth Grandin; Henry L. Merritt; William Wicks; Chittenden Trust Company; Neil Pelsue, Jr.; Peter J. Greaney; Natalie Starr; Jeffrey B. Axelrod; G.E. Nichols; Michael Rouse & Carol Delaney; Daneil R. Pierce; Debbie Wolfe; Edmund Lydon, Jr.; Liz Turner; Mr. & Mrs. Gordon Richardson; Bonnie & Robert Baird; Arlene J. McLeod; John H. Lyons, Jr.; Carlos Pinkham; Jessie Aronow; Maria Salvaggio; Natalie B. Stevens; Faith F. Forbes; Elizabeth Pratt; Richard Perron; Trinity College Library; Fending of Vermont/Maarten Samson; Mr. & Mrs. Carleton H. Clement; Rev. Stephen Von Fauer; Randolph T. Major, Jr.; Margaret T. Downey; William N. Ryerson; Dr. Donald K. Rice; Mabel Ross, MD; R. M. Peardon Donaghy; Duncan Leete; Mrs. Wilma Rice; Maurice C. Peters.



100% FANCY GRADE GIVES YOU A TASTE FOR VT. MUSIC

I don't usually like collections of music by a dozen different artists; "musical smorgasbords" don't give the listener a chance to savor the talents of any particular artist. But *100% Fancy Grade: An Anthology of Vermont Music* transcends this problem and flows along as easily as, well, fancy grade maple syrup.

Fancy Grade, produced by WNCS-radio, our good neighbors upstairs at the Old Train Depot, has a nice feeling for the landscape of Vermont from many different perspectives. It starts off with Jon Gailmor's very personal love song to Vermont, "Long Ago Lady." Which fits easily with Coco and the Lonesome Road's

... song about New England
North wind blowin' strong
It's just as country as Dixie
Though the winters sure seem long

Kevin Agosti curses and celebrates Vermont's most famous product in "Maple Syrup," and Steve Mullaney sings of modern "Gypsies," a young couple who "moved to these hills to settle down and make a home and garden," but can't resist the urge to "pump up the tires and spin the globe around."

Dick McCormack will break your heart with "Voices in the Hills," the story of a 7th-generation Vermonter whose family lives "like exiles in our own land."

... as the cities closed in on us
Our one choice looked too simple:
You go broke from paying taxes
Or get rich from selling land

Finally, who can resist the charm of Banjo Dan and the Midnight Plowboys' tribute to the quiet beauty and soul-healing qualities of a soft Vermont snowfall:

Snowfall ...
It'll cover up your cares
It's comin' down heavy tonight
Snowfall ...
It'll drift right over your worries
It's easin' down snow tonight
It's easin' down soft
Easin' down white
Everything's alright
It's easin' down snow tonight

Road Apple, Tom Eslick, the John Cassel Band, Pine Island and Kilimanjaro are also well-represented on this album, which ought to get the "Vermont Seal of Quality" for fresh, natural, all-Vermont ingredients. It'll give you a taste of Vermont music and an appetite for more! MM

MEMBERSHIP RENEWAL OFFER

You'll be getting your membership renewal notice in a couple of weeks, and with it you'll find a notice of a special offer for those who upgrade their memberships by \$10.00 or more. You'll have another chance at Carl Reidel's *New England Prospects* and Charles Johnson's *Nature of Vermont* (see reviews in the January/February 1982 and September/October 1980 VERs, or write us for reprints). But we're also offering *100% Fancy Grade: An Anthology of Vermont Music*, a record album produced by our good neighbors upstairs at the Old Train Depot (see review, this page). A tough choice, but we hope you'll find at least one of the options irresistible.

A new publication -- CHARITABLE GIFTS OF LAND

VNRC members who would like to know more about federal and state tax laws that encourage land conservation will be interested in *Charitable Gifts of Land: A Landowner's Guide to Vermont and Federal Tax Incentives*, authored by former VNRC counsel Darby Bradley. The booklet reviews -- in lay terms -- income, capital gains, property and estate tax laws, and describes how to compute the tax consequences of conveying land or conservation restrictions to a land trust. It also examines sales, gifts, bargain-sales and other forms of conveying property for conservation purposes.

The booklet is being published jointly by the Ottauquechee Regional Land Trust, the Nature Conservancy, the Vermont Natural Resources Council and the Lake Champlain Islands Trust. You may obtain a copy for \$1.50 (\$2.50 for non-members) by sending a check to the Ottauquechee Regional Land Trust, 7 Main Street, Montpelier, Vermont 05602.



(Photo: Blanche LaRose and Loretta Lynch in action)

A WORD OF THANKS

We'd like to thank some of the folks who helped out so generously with this fall's membership campaign:

•Our faithful crew of RSVP volunteers labeled, sorted and bundled more than 14,000 pieces of mail in the last month. Reesa Adams, Jemma Garcia, Gladys Hatch, Blanche LaRose, Loretta Lynch, Lee Rowell, Anne Sinclair and Mr. and Mrs. Maurice Townshend -- what would we have done without you?

•We'd also like to thank the Stephen Greene Press for loaning us their mailing list.

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Town or City _____
State _____ Zip _____

() Please bill me
() Enclosed is \$_____ for a membership in the following category:
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Mail to: VNRC, 7 Main Street, Montpelier, Vermont 05602

Farming in Vermont/A View from the Inside

Marybeth Deller

A common complaint these days is that our government is out of touch with the views of the people it represents, and that legislation does not always accurately or justly reflect the needs of those it will affect. In an attempt to bridge the gap between the farmer and the legislator on the issue of what, if anything, should be done to protect Vermont farmland, the Vermont Natural Resources Council recently queried 5000 subscribers to the *New England Farmer*. More than 300 readers from all over the state responded. The results of the VNRC survey offer much insight into the problems of agriculture in Vermont.

Is loss of farmland really a problem in Vermont? Our survey respondents replied with an emphatic "yes." 87% believe farmland loss is a problem, 11% said it is not a problem and 2% are undecided. Asked why they see this as a problem, farmers gave a variety of reasons, of which four were most common:

- Once land is retired from farming, it is difficult -- sometimes nearly impossible -- to reclaim it for agricultural purposes. A Pownal farmer reported that, "in my town there are only six farms left. It is a struggle for the farmers working the land. When the land is sold, it is often developed or goes to scrub." Many farmers feel that land use is changing so fast that we cannot measure all the consequences.

- Several people pointed out that there is little prime farmland in Vermont (only about 10 - 20% of the land currently in use). Most of this lies in the Lake Champlain and Connecticut River Valley areas. These lowland regions, where the land is flat and fertile, also happen to be near urban areas rallying for space to expand.

Rich, level farmland, however, is not the only candidate for early retirement from agricultural use. Small family-run hillside farms -- especially economically-marginal operations -- are also selling out in alarming numbers. Often these farms are in scenic spots or are near ski areas and are therefore attractive to developers. Said one survey respondent, "out-of-state interests in new industries and tourism, promoted by the State, have a competitive edge without the same State promotion of its agricultural products."

- Some blamed loss of farmland on competition from within the dairy industry. Consumer reliance

on the lower-priced products marketed by large farm corporations, or "agri-business," makes the small, family-run farm economically infeasible. This eliminates a way of life -- particularly a way of raising children -- that still has great appeal to many Vermonters.

"Farming is the backbone of Vermont," wrote a couple from East Fairfield. Farmers maintain "the dignity and rural quality of life for others to enjoy and benefit from," but instead of rewards they get "less money for their milk, high property taxes and increased capital costs."

The death of the family farm could destroy Vermont's unique rural character -- an asset all too often taken for granted. It is a quality not only essential to the lifestyle of those who have chosen Vermont as their home, but one that is inextricably bound up with another part of our state's economy -- tourism. One individual sensibly observed that, "businessmen who depend on non-residents for much of their gross should understand that they have a vested interest in the agricultural community. There should be more cooperation and coordination between tourist industries and farmers."

- The fourth concern is that at present New England imports 80% of its food from other regions. Many people worry that some day, because of transportation costs or other economic or political problems, Vermont may need to become more self-sufficient. Yet if current trends in land development continue, we could lose our ability to grow more of our own food.

Several *New England Farmer* readers pointed to the folly of transporting goods hundreds or even thousands of miles -- cheese from Wisconsin, maple syrup from Canada, wool from New Zealand -- when the exact same products can be produced here. As one person put it, "in a day of luxury and consumption, it is easy to forget the value of local industry."

One of the ironies of modern agricultural marketing is that while New England farmers are contributing very little to the nationwide dairy surplus, they will pay dearly for cuts in milk price supports designed to curb over-production (incidentally, one cannot help wondering what the term "surplus" means when millions of people are starving).

The farmers gave several reasons for why we are losing farms. Many of them feel the prices they receive

for their products are too low in relation to production costs. This includes soaring interest rates, inflated land prices and high property taxes. "The government controls the farmer's price for his product," said a man from Middlebury, "but not his expenses -- all of which are at retail market prices. This is an anomaly."

Most people who responded to our survey said that if farmers received a profit comparable to their investment, there would be no need for anyone to intercede in an effort to save farmland. Or, as one individual predicted, "farms will continue to disappear as long as farmers can't make a living working 14 hours a day."

Few young people can afford to go into farming. Likewise, many of those already in business have no money to spare for modernization or experiments in fuel economy.

Many farmers believe there is simply too much emphasis on dairying, and that the only way to improve our farm economy is to diversify. A Wolcott man thinks, "the key to farmland preservation is encouragement of markets. If the produce is not wanted, the farmland can only be 'kept' by some welfare-style boondoggle." But many farmers said they are not prepared, financially or otherwise, for diversification into different agricultural products.

Survey respondents did not agree on what, if anything, should be done to solve Vermont's complex agricultural problems. Of those who believe farmland loss is a problem, most feel strongly that a combination of natural resource and farm conservation organizations and local, state and federal government agencies should work with the farmer to preserve the land. The important thing, they stress, is that these programs be attractive to the farmer, with as few strings attached as possible.

The 11% who believe that farmland loss is not a problem generally feel that the free enterprise system should be allowed to take its course; responsibility for farmland preservation belongs solely to the farmer.

Almost everyone who answered our questionnaire feels that the farmer should not

bear the full costs of farmland preservation. The burden should be shared, as one farmer aptly put it, by "anyone who wants to eat."

VNRC will share the information and insight from these questionnaires with the Vermont Department of Agriculture and with Agriculture Commissioner George Dunsmore's Task Force, which is preparing a package of farmland preservation bills for the 1983 General Assembly. Any such program must have the backing and support of Vermont's farming community, and must aim to revitalize agriculture -- not just protect the land. In the words of a man from Vermont's capital city, "we cannot preserve farmland as a museum or a tourist attraction;" farming must remain a viable and valued profession.

Marybeth Deller is a VNRC intern who graduated from Goddard College with a degree in natural sciences and writing. She is writing a book about the water cycle for children.

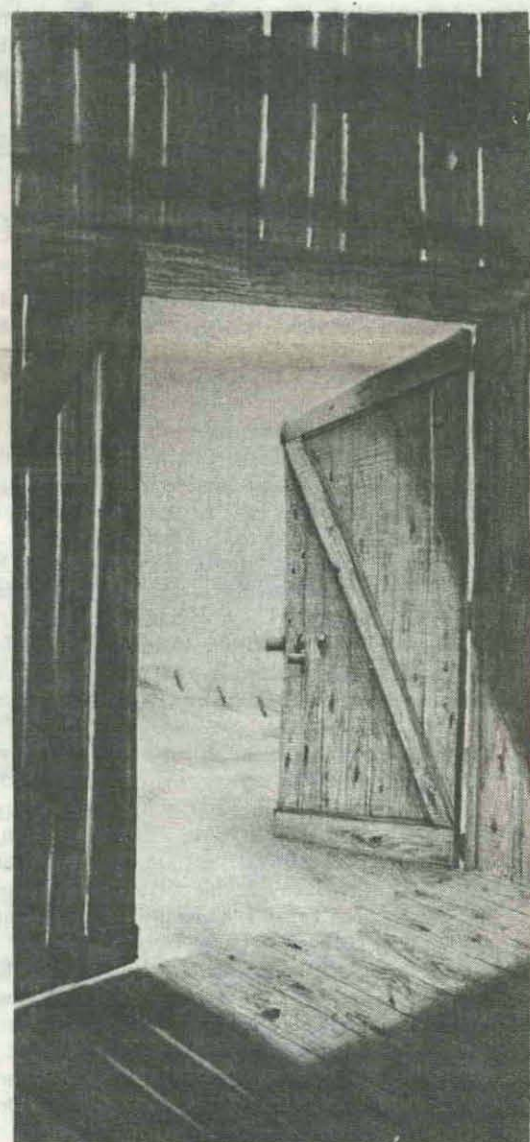


Illustration by David Baird



Vermont Environmental Report

Vermont Natural Resources Council
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November/December 1982

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