

Local Development Pressure and Land Use Decisions: Farmland Change in a Diversified Agricultural Sector

High land prices and development, a shift away from a dairy-based agricultural commodity economy and the explosion of the local food movement have contributed to the diversification of products and land use in Vermont. Many farmers have found economically viable niches in areas such as community supported agriculture, direct sales, organic products and specialty foods. The Center for Rural Studies (CRS) conducted a farm-level survey of members of targeted agricultural networks in conjunction with farmer interviews and conversations with key agricultural and planning stakeholders to determine how farmland is being used in the state and investigate the relationship between development pressure and land use.

The farmers were asked about their products, current and anticipated land use and their perceptions of development pressure and local government bodies' level of support for farmers and understanding of agricultural issues. The findings give insight into the current state of agriculture in Vermont and offer a glimpse at future trends. They also highlight the land-use and planning implications of the state's evolving agricultural economy.

CRS mailed self-administered questionnaires to all the farmer members of the Northeast Organic Farmer Association of Vermont (NOFA-VT), Vermont Fresh Network (VFN) and Women's Agricultural Network (WAgN) as well as farm stand owners all over the state. There were 474 valid responses. The results have a confidence interval of 95 percent and a margin of error of +/- 4 percent.

The main research findings are as follows:

Survey findings

- **Products.** According to the 474 farmer responses, the most common primary products were vegetables (38 percent), dairy products (23.9 percent), and fruit (19.2 percent). Animal feed, beef, other meat animals, maple syrup and horticulture were all in the 14 to 16 percent range. Fiber and eggs were the next most common products in the "other" category, with 5.7 and 4.6 percent, respectively. Not all products fell within specified categories. These niche products included compost, honey, worms, mushrooms, goat's milk soap, oilseed crops and lactofermented vegetables like sauerkraut.
- **Diversification.** Slightly more than half of respondents said they had two to four main products, compared to just under 40 percent who said they had one main product, 8.3 percent who identified five to seven different product categories and 1.1 percent who identified eight or nine categories. It is important to note that each respondent may have multiple items in each product category.

