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Farmland facing threats

Vermont's thriving farm economy, our healthy environment and our healthy climate all depend on good farmland. Vermont's many acres of valuable farmland support a wide and diverse range of agriculture. From apple orchards and berry farms to community gardens, dairy and livestock farms, these all rely on good-quality farmland.

That good-quality farmland pays us back in more than just the food and crops it grows. Local farms help Vermont be more resilient to the effects of climate change. They also help reduce carbon emissions that contribute to global warming. And there is not a single Vermonter who doesn't appreciate and value the open space and broad vistas that many of our farms provide. Our farms make Vermont unique. And our farms need good farmland to thrive.

Unfortunately, good farmland is increasingly in short supply in Vermont. Good farmland takes thousands of years to create. Though Vermont is fortunate to have had the help of glaciers and rivers many years ago to create the valuable asset we now have, it is our responsibility to keep those assets intact and available for future generations.

As the impacts of climate change grow more severe, maintaining our farms and our ability to grow food and crops become more important than ever.

As Vermont moves out of the recent recession, the pressures increase on Vermont farmland. Pavement is not an agricultural product. Yet traveling along any of Vermont's major roadways shows that farmland outside of town is sprouting more concrete than crops.

Bulldozing our rural farmland for massive new developments makes it harder to farm the land that remains. Farmers should not be left trying to piece together a viable farm from the few small parcels left behind.

Instead Vermont should strengthen the ways it encourages development in town and provide stronger protection for farmland outside of town. This helps farms create a bulwark against sprawling development. Keeping more services and buildings in town, surrounded by farms nearby, fosters community and helps us tackle global warming pollution. Our food is closer, providing more opportunities to drive less and burn less polluting fossil fuels.

Unfortunately, some plans for over-developing valuable farmland move Vermont in the wrong direction. From a planned new truck stop and convenience store near the Interstate in Berlin, to a new shopping mall on Route 7 south of Rutland to an enormous new development at the Randolph Interstate exit, all of these are chewing away at farm fields.

Vermont's Act 250 provides protections for farmland. As with water quality, air quality and community resources, Act 250 prohibits some building on valuable farm resources because it is just too damaging to the resource. In other situations, Act 250 requires projects to be designed in a way that leaves valuable agricultural soils available for farming.

The effectiveness of the Act 250 protections for valuable farmland is being sorely tested. Last year in South Burlington, a developer sought a determination that a forty-acre field with a farmhouse and barn on site was not in fact suitable for farming. Thankfully that request was rejected.

At the Randolph Interstate exit, a developer is now proposing to build over 1 million square feet of new buildings. That is roughly equal to the size of 10 big box stores in a rural and fairly undeveloped area, with over 100 acres of exceptionally high-quality farmland.

When it comes to farming, Vermont should not erode its strong Act 250 protections. Instead Vermont's support for farming should be as hardworking as its farmers. Our actions speak louder than our words. We cannot say we support farming if our decisions drive more and more farmers off the land.

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