



Description of Event

The Farm to Plate [Land Access & Land Use Topic Exchange](#) convened a listening session to gather feedback through a farming and food systems lens on draft pathways within Objective 2 of the Vermont Conservation Plan, developed under Act 59. The audience for the session was Farm to Plate Network members and invited stakeholders. Approximately 27 people attended the session. The session included an overview from VHCB, followed by connections to farming and food sectors as identified by Farm to Plate staff, followed by breakout group discussions on Pathways 1, 2, and 3, and a full group debrief and discussion.

Executive Summary

Participants agree with the importance of biodiversity in supporting healthy ecosystems, but feel that there is a lack of clarity, feasibility, and trust in implementation, particularly around impacts to working lands, funding, and the role of local institutions. Participants expressed that farming has a critical role to play in ecosystem health and supporting biodiversity, and felt that the plan doesn't adequately address this.

The pathways were often experienced as conceptual and difficult to interpret, which led participants to focus more on clarifying intent, implications, and real-world impacts than on providing detailed, action-specific feedback. However, Farm to Plate staff in organizing this document, has pulled out from the discussion and generated suggestions based on that feedback.

Across all groups, feedback could be consistently grouped into four core themes/questions:

- What does this mean in practice?
- How will this be implemented?
- What will the impact be on farms and rural communities?
- How will farms and rural communities play a meaningful role in this process and these solutions?

Each breakout group surfaced different dimensions of these concerns:

Pathway	What it surfaced
1. Equitable Access	Conceptual clarity, trust, governance, power,

	process
2. Working Lands	Farm viability, regulation, real-world constraints
3. Climate	Missing content, knowledge gaps, missing environmental specifics

Key Takeaways Across Breakout Groups & Full Group Discussion

Clarity of Purpose

Participants raised questions about what specific problems the proposed actions are intended to solve and how success would be defined. There were also questions and concerns about how the global conservation framework this Act is based on translates to Vermont’s specific context.

- Targets may not be grounded in local conditions
- Relying too heavily on permanent land conservation as a primary strategy may not be the most effective or efficient use of resources
- There’s a need to answer the question, “What is the role of farming in conservation?”

Clarity & Definition of Key Concepts

Participants expressed a consistent need for clearer definitions and shared understanding of key terms and concepts, including:

- Equitable access
- Sustainable working lands
- Climate resilience
- Conservation

Suggestion: Provide clear, plain-language definitions and develop concrete, place-based examples that illustrate how these translate into action on the ground. Incorporate feedback from farmers and other key stakeholders to develop these definitions, and create shared meaning.

Framing of Conservation & Climate Work

Participants reflected on the framing of conservation, noting that terms such as *restoration*, *resilience*, and *stewardship* can be interpreted differently and may not reflect current conditions. There was a strong emphasis on shifting toward *regeneration* and *long-term stewardship*.

Suggestion: Consider adopting language and framing that reflect ongoing stewardship and working landscape realities, and position conservation as one tool within a broader, integrated land management approach for biodiversity and community resilience.

Implementation & Practical Application

Participants frequently asked how the pathways will translate into on-the-ground action, including what funding, tools, programs, and policies will be used, who responsible parties will be, how decisions will be made and prioritized, and what implementation will look like for farmers, landowners, and communities.

Suggestion: clearer articulation of how responsibilities would be shared across agencies and partners, how different stakeholders could meaningfully engage with the plan, how the plan will be implemented, and what “success” looks like if we know we’re not going to meet the goals in either 2030 or 2050.

Equity & Access

Participants engaged with the importance of equitable access, but requested greater clarity on:

- what types of access are prioritized (e.g., land, housing, livelihoods)
- who benefits from conservation efforts
- barriers to participation

There was strong interest in ensuring that conservation strategies expand, not restrict, access to land and opportunity.

Working Lands Viability

Participants emphasized that conservation strategies must support, not constrain, farm viability. Concerns included the impact of overlapping policies and regulations, potential limitations on diversification (ex, agritourism, housing, events) and the need to think on the evolving nature of farm operations, especially under climate change, and land access and land use pressures. Participants emphasized that working lands are not separate from a healthy landscape, but are essential to achieving one.

Suggestion: Ensure policies explicitly support diversified farm enterprises, and align conservation strategies with the economic realities of farming today. Incorporate succession planning and next-generation access into implementation approaches.

Governance, Process & Public Trust

Significant concerns were raised about governance, transparency, and public engagement and trust. There is a great deal of confusion and conflation between Act 59 and Act 181, concerns about erosion of local control, and the accessibility of planning processes, materials, and tools.

Some noted that the framework may feel redundant or duplicative of existing regulations, and emphasized the importance of ensuring that new efforts do not unintentionally undermine working lands or rural economies (e.g., by redirecting funds that are working well/are effective in protecting and promoting working lands and rural economies).

Suggestion: Improve communication and transparency around the relationship and the distinction between Act 59 and other land use policies, clarify how decisions are made, and strengthen opportunities and extend timelines for meaningful local engagement. Make data more widely accessible.

Role of Existing Institutions

Across the board, participants strongly emphasized the importance of leveraging existing systems and organizations, particularly Conservation Districts. These are trusted, experienced organizations, who have deep experience, and established relationships working directly with farmers and landowners and are embedded within communities. They are also involved in ongoing workforce development efforts. There was concern they are underrepresented in the plan.

There was concern that the plan does not sufficiently reflect or leverage this existing foundation, representing a missed opportunity for effective implementation.

Suggestion: Elevate Conservation Districts as key implementation partners, who are experts in this field, and a valuable resource, who can play a more central role in outreach, engagement, and implementation. More fully integrate them into the plan, and provide increased funding to do this work.

Funding & Feasibility

Participants questioned the financial feasibility of the plan and the lack of clearly identified funding sources and strategies. There was uncertainty about how implementation would be supported at the scale envisioned.

Suggestion: Clearly identify funding sources and strategies, account for the full cost of implementation, and ensure that new initiatives build on, rather than strain, existing resources and systems. Additionally, these needs should be clearly and directly communicated to the legislature as a mechanism of accountability that they can be held to if goals aren't being met, or as conditions necessary to meeting the legislatively defined goals of Act 59.

Feedback about Specific Pathways from Breakout Groups

Pathway 1

Feedback focused on the importance of defining what “access” means in practice, including access to land, housing, and land-based livelihoods. There were also broader questions about how “conservation” is defined within the plan, and how it relates to active land use, including farming. Participants raised concerns about whether proposed approaches might unintentionally limit access to land and create additional barriers for small-scale or nontraditional land users and producers, and may make farming more difficult. There was strong interest in community-based models and utilizing existing local knowledge. Participants emphasized that farming can play a regenerative role, be supportive of conservation goals, and that conservation should not exclude people from living and working on land.

Participants also raised concerns related to governance, trust, and the broader policy context influencing how this pathway is being received. Participants raised questions about the feasibility of implementation given the lack of identified funding, and expressed frustration with perceived top-down approaches and limited local input. Several participants noted that these dynamics are already impacting relationships between conservation entities and the farming community.

Participants noted that the scale of investment required, particularly for tools like conservation easements, may not be realistic under current funding conditions, and expressed concern about the impact of unfunded mandates on existing conservation work. There was an interest in continued engagement (e.g., OPAV 2.0)

Suggestions:

- Clarify what types of access to land are prioritized and how they will be supported
- Incorporate more regenerative, community-based and cooperative ownership models
- Ensure approaches expand, rather than restrict, access to land and opportunity
- Leverage existing local knowledge and institutions to guide implementation; build trust where it's been broken
- better integrate existing tools, knowledge, and institutions into the plan, rather than rely on a single approach

Pathway 2

Participants responded strongly to the focus on working lands, but emphasized the need for clearer alignment with the evolving realities of farm viability, diversification, and existing agricultural systems; modern farms rely on diversified income streams, including agritourism, events, and on-farm housing, and there was concern that regulatory constraints may limit these opportunities. There was concern that, particularly when considered alongside Act 181, the proposed framework may create additional barriers for farmers seeking to adapt, diversify, and

remain economically viable. Participants emphasized that even small limitations (e.g., caps on events, housing, or agritourism activities) can significantly impact a farm's ability to sustain itself.

Participants also emphasized farmland succession and access for the next-generation of farmers as key components that conservation and land protection need to align with to ensure long-term agricultural use of land.

Inconsistencies in how farmland and forests are framed were noted. For example, while working forests are explicitly described as needing protection, farmland is framed differently.

Participants expressed interest in how the plan could build on existing progress in workforce development, technical assistance, and farmer support.

There was also curiosity about emerging tools such as innovative farm transfer models, including questions about how these approaches would address issues such as debt, affordability, and long-term land access.

Suggestions:

- more clearly elevate farmland as a resource that also requires protection, and align language across sectors to reflect shared values and priorities
- Support diversified farm enterprises, including agritourism and on-farm housing
- Invest in succession planning and tools for farm transfer that keep agricultural land in active production
- develop a statewide farmland prioritization map based on existing data to guide strategic investment and outreach
- Recognize the interconnected nature of farmland and forest stewardship

Pathway 3

Participants supported the broad goal of climate resilience, but identified that farming isn't specifically named in this pathway, but needs to be. Connecting climate strategies to agricultural practices and realities, and balancing resilience goals with farm viability is important.

Participants identified several areas they felt were underrepresented or missing from the draft materials, including:

- riparian buffer zones and stream protection
- pesticide use and its impacts on soil biodiversity, ecosystem health, and human health
- water quality and erosion

There was concern that these omissions limit the plan's ability to fully address climate resilience, particularly in relation to agricultural systems and watershed health.

Another theme was the importance of water management in building climate resilience, identifying the need to:

- retain water on the landscape
- address both drought and flooding conditions
- reduce erosion and improve soil and watershed health

Examples discussed included small-scale water retention practices (e.g., swales, keyline design), riparian buffers, and agroforestry systems. Participants noted that these approaches can support both agricultural productivity and ecological resilience, but are not always well understood or consistently supported.

Participants highlighted the need to balance climate resilience practices with farm viability. For example, expanding riparian buffers or changing land management practices may impact yields or available production land, and these tradeoffs need to be acknowledged and addressed.

Suggestions

- recognize degraded landscapes and the need for rehabilitation (*not* restoration)
- supporting ongoing, adaptive management
- Increase awareness, accessibility, and coordination of funding pathways and technical assistance for farmers and land stewards
- Strengthen attention to water systems, including riparian buffers and erosion
- Address pesticide use as part of climate and ecosystem health
- Increase support for regenerative agriculture and agroforestry practices
- Frame conservation as an integrated relationship between land, people, and community needs with success including the ability to support resilient, biodiverse landscapes over time, rather than achieving a fixed endpoint