From the Farm to Plate Team:

A Time to Reflect; The Future of Farm to Plate

One of the subtle benefits of living in a temperate climate is that there’s always ample opportunity to reflect. The changing seasons provide cues in the landscape to look within and think about what has transpired and how we plan to act in the season ahead. It’s fortuitous then that our Annual Gathering lands around the transition between fall and winter – maybe not strictly by the calendar, but it certainly feels like we’re headed to winter. It’s no wonder then, that the Gathering brings an atmosphere ripe for deep conversations, new realizations, and renewed energy. Our focus on resilience at this year’s Gathering gives us an opportunity to reflect on where we’ve been and where our food system as a whole is headed. We’ll also focus on the tools and resources we’ll need to manage the changes in our environment, economy, and politics happening both within our state, and the borders beyond nationally and internationally, at seemingly ever increasing rates.

At last year’s 2017 Annual Gathering we had our own important realization that came through asking a reflective and forward looking question to attendees about the future of the Farm to Plate Network, and whether or not it should continue past 2020. Reading the reaction in the room, we quickly discovered that many were unaware that Farm to Plate was intended to conclude by 2020, to coincide with the end date of the Farm to Plate Strategic Plan. While it was our plan to engage with stakeholders on this very question, the reaction gave us a greater sense of urgency to reach out to Network members and partners and work on articulating a plan for Farm to Plate past 2020.

Since that time Farm to Plate staff and members of the Network’s Steering Committee have put a lot of effort into surveying and interviewing stakeholders from all sectors of the food system – staff at non-profits and government agencies, funders, and business owners – and the results reveal a strong desire to continue with Farm to Plate, but also to refocus our priorities and ways of working together. Of those we surveyed and interviewed 92% said Farm to Plate should continue past 2020, and no one amongst the remaining 8% answered with a definitive “no, it should not continue”. We also learned that legislative reauthorization was viewed as critical to the next iteration of Farm to Plate.
Farm to Plate Letter cont...

With those two key data points in mind, we are now in the midst of further refining the priorities and scope of Farm to Plate 2.0, and will be working with the House and Senate Agricultural Committees to work out what reauthorization will entail. With this in mind, we expect the Network to continue to evolve and change prior to any changes that may be introduced or catalyzed by legislative reauthorization. “Form Follows Function” has always been a guiding principle of the Network, and we recognize from interviews that there’s a need to adapt and change now rather than arbitrarily hold firm until 2020.

At its core, resilience is about retaining high levels of functionality, integrity, and core purpose in the face of changing circumstances. Unsurprisingly then, choosing resilience as a theme came from a recognition that change and adaptation are on all of our minds in many different forms, and we hope applying the lens of resilience can help in forging a path ahead for an economically, environmentally, and socially healthy and viable food system.

Farm to Plate Team at the Vermont Sustainable Jobs Fund

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Working Groups
Aggregation and Distribution
Consumer Education and Marketing
Education and Workforce Development
Farmland Access and Stewardship
Production and Processing

Cross-cutting Teams
Energy
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Production & Processing

The Production and Processing Working Group has had a busy year engaging in projects related to strengthening farm apprenticeships, grass-fed beef, grains production, and sector specific business viability analysis and benchmarking. Highlights include:

Dairy Grazing Apprenticeship (DGA) Program:
When the Production and Processing Working Group and Farmland Access and Stewardship Working Group began joint conversations around farm succession in 2016, a question arose around how to build better mentorship and training for potential successors, especially for dairy farms. The groups identified the nationwide Dairy Grazing Apprenticeship as a program that could help address some of the issues around mentoring and succession and decided to investigate further. The DGA, which pairs Master Graziers with qualified Apprentices, is the only federally registered apprenticeship for agriculture, and provides work-based training, nationally recognized credentials, and a pipeline for connecting mid-career graziers with committed future employees and late-career graziers with potential successors. Vermont historically had a number of prospective Masters, and one active Master-Apprentice pair, but for many years has been without its own Education Coordinator, a position which not only approves Masters but also helps to grow the network and facilitate new Master-Apprentice pairings.

Grass Fed Beef Production:
The Production and Processing Working Group has spearheaded the effort to bring Dave Pratt, owner of Ranch Management Consultants and teacher of the renowned Ranching For Profit School, to Vermont as part of larger initiative to strengthen Vermont’s grass-fed beef industry. Dave ran a day-long workshop “The Three Secrets for Increasing Profit” on October 16 at Green Mountain Girls Farm in Northfield. In 2019, Dave will be back in Vermont in Burlington from Feb 3-9th running the full Ranching For Profit School. The school is designed for livestock farms of all scales and stages of development—the ranching terminology is used as the school is typically run in the western US and Canada—and participants will leave with insights and tools they can apply immediately to simplify their business, improve their land, and increase profitability.

Additional grass-fed beef resources developed in the effort to strengthen the industry, including a grass-fed beef market research report and the newly published grass-fed beef profitability guide and cow-calf and feeder budgets, can be found in the resources section of the Farm to Plate website.

Local Grain Value Chain Development:
Working Group members are in the early phases of conducting a value chain assessment and exploring opportunities for increasing regional grain production and processing to better supply local bakery, distillery, and brewing industry needs. Working Group co-chair Regina Beidler travelled to Quebec with representatives from the Northern Grain Growers Association and UVM Extention to meet with Canadian miller Milanaise to talk further about existing market opportunities for Vermont farm raised grains. The meeting helped identify the need for Vermont producers to have access to grain centers. Milanaise buys from grain centers, a piece of infrastructure Vermont lacks. The grain centers serve as aggregation and quality control points, making sure that grains are adequately dried, weighed, stored, and then mixed on request from buyers like Milanaise. Next steps includes a visit to a Quebec grain center to see how they operate and to get advice on what Vermont would need to have to move forward with its own grain center. A future meeting is also being planned with King Arthur Flour who has expressed interest in Vermont grains but hasn't been able to move forward due to a lack of infrastructure.

The Business Viability Indicators Task Force continue to develop best practice production guidelines for farmers to use around specific products in high demand by consumers and institutional markets. In the coming year the task force will support the development of more readily available online organic dairy cost of production data and analysis, look to advise other programs and stakeholders with viability indicator standards and methods, and disseminate best practices through stories, editorials, and presentations.
Farmland Access & Stewardship

The Farmland Access & Stewardship Working Group is setting new goals for action and is working on approaches to issues and opportunities with solar siting, agroforestry, and succession “sticking points”. The group will be focusing on these issues, and sees some potential alignment with research opportunities at Vermont Law School. The group has been closely following developments with the Farm Bill, and how its final form will impact Vermonters.

The Farmland Access Task Force is working to increase the number of farmers engaged with Vermont Land Link; a website created to link farmers without land to farmers with land to lease, sell or collaborate on. The next meeting will be focused on making the site more robust. The group has been discussing issues around cuts to federal conservation money, and how it will affect easements over the next few years, as well as how to improve returns on forested pieces of conserved farms. The task force is looking at how to keep a “Transfer the Farm” workshop going, and will potentially be hosting a succession school within the next year.

Aggregation & Distribution

Members of the Aggregation and Distribution Working Group have been active in a number of activities related to wholesale market development, with a focus on retail and institutional market channels.

On the institutional front, Farm to Plate has been working closely with Sodexo’s Vermont First Program to align values and influence sourcing decisions. The work has already led to changes in local meat purchasing, and Farm to Plate is now working as a member of Vermont First’s Supply Chain Task Force to increase purchasing of Vermont dairy products.

The working group is also turning its attention to better understanding the regional wholesale marketplace and will be supporting a research project led by NOFA-VT. The research will examine how shifts in the wholesale market are impacting our producers, where there might be new opportunities, and develop strategies and tools to support our producers to adapt to changing market conditions and opportunities.

Ag-Enterprise Legislation

Act 143: An act relating to municipal land use regulation of accessory on-farm businesses and to hemp cultivation passed the Vermont Legislature with the help of many Farm to Plate Network members. Accessory on-farm businesses include farm cafes, shared processing, farm dinners, events and on-farm educational activities, and farm stays. The bill creates consistency and clarity across the entire state by requiring that no municipal land use bylaw have the effect of prohibiting an accessory on-farm business at the same location as a farm regulated under the Required Agricultural Practices (RAP rules). A group of Network members representing both farmers and planners played a role in crafting the bill, working over the fall and winter to find consensus on key provisions that satisfy both farmers’ and municipal planners’ needs.

Keelers Bay Variety Store Meat Case

At Keeler’s Bay Variety in South Hero, for example, Task Force Chair Annie Harlow worked with staff on expanding options for local meat and improving product displays to more prominently identify local products for consumers. Harlow’s efforts with Keeler Bay to improve local food labelling aligns with 2017 Vermont Poll results, which found that 62.8% of Vermonters would buy more local food if it was more clearly labeled and identified as local.
Consumer Education & Marketing

**Rooted In Vermont** celebrates all the ways Vermonters enjoy and acquire local food. A partnership of businesses, nonprofits, and state agencies are working to change the local food narrative so everyone in Vermont sees local food as their own. Whether it’s farming, hunting and fishing, foraging, or growing a small garden, Vermonters have been doing local for generations and should feel that they are part of the local food movement.

One way Rooted in VT is reaching communities is by word of mouth through local residents acting as community ambassadors. Anyone interested in learning more about how they can be a community ambassador for the movement is encouraged to sign up for the Rooted in VT mailing list. Those who sign up will receive information about small, easy actions that can be taken to help spread the word.

Additionally, Rooted in VT teamed up with NOFA-VT over the summer to encourage the community ambassadors to help promote Vermont’s farmers market. Anybody who posted a picture of themselves, their friends, or their family to social media and tagged @RootedinVermont and @NOFAVT were entered to win a $25 gift certificate to their favorite farmers market.

To learn more about Rooted In VT and stay engaged, check out the Rooted in VT Brochure, like or follow Rooted in Vermont on Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter, or contact the Rooted in Vermont Project Manager, Shane Rogers, with any questions.

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**Communications and Marketing Community of Practice:** The Vermont Food System Communicators and Marketers Facebook group continues to grow, with a total of 179 members; increasing its membership by 44% since the start of the year. The group is open to anyone working in food system communications and marketing (staff at nonprofits, businesses, or government; marketing business owners, staff and consultants; and food writers in Vermont). The purpose of the group is to help Vermont food system businesses and organizations hone their skills in communication and marketing best practices. The group can also help connect Vermont farm and food businesses with communication and marketing service providers or consultants.

**Agritourism Task Force:** Over the past year the Task Force has helped to organize a series of skill-building workshops for farmers, including a December 2017 event at Liberty Hill Farm on Dairy Tours & Overnight Farm Stays, and an August 2018 event at Cedar Circle Farm on Food Safety for Farms Open to Visitors. In total, the workshop series included over a hundred participants.

An important perennial project of the Agritourism TF is its participation in the Open Farm Week (OFW) planning committee. This August’s 5th annual Open Farm Week had 41 participating farms from 12 counties, and an estimated attendance of over a thousand visitors. Based on survey responses, an estimated 88% of farms offered new products or experiences specifically for OFW. Over 90% said OFW was helpful or very helpful in educating customers/visitors about farms and food, and over 80% said it was helpful or very helpful in attracting new customers/visitors. Also noteworthy this year was a new partnership with Kingdom Farm and Food Days to cross-promote the events, with 8 farms participated in both events.

In October, the Task Force held a retreat to evaluate the state of agritourism in Vermont and the best role of the Task Force going forward. The group identified continuing needs around technical assistance, connectivity across members of the industry and with related tourism industries, collaborative marketing and public awareness, and regulatory issues. In early 2019, subcommittees will further explore several promising project ideas that arose as potential next steps. The conversation from the retreat continues at the Gathering in the breakout session “What is the Real Potential of Food Tourism?”.
Education & Workforce Development

Over the past year, the Education and Workforce Development Working Group has been expanding its two long-term projects, the Career Profiles Project and the Workforce-Education-Business Partnerships (WEBs).

In the Workforce-Education-Business Partnerships model, members of the Working Group design and host a series of local events to bring together workforce development organizations, educators, and food system businesses, at the county level. In 2018, the Lamoille County/ Northern Vermont WEB continued its 2017 project with two events for educators and a “community listening session” for food system businesses to express their needs to education and workforce development organizations. The Washington County WEB relaunched after a year hiatus, and included a food-system-specific meeting of the Central Vermont Regional Workforce Partnership, and a panel presentation on food system businesses for educators. A WEB also formed in Bennington County, which to date has facilitated community SWOT discussions in the Town of Bennington and Manchester, and will round out the year with a county-wide event.

The Career Profiles Project is a way for students at high schools and tech centers to explore a wide range of careers through interviews of food system professionals in their community, with support from members of the Career Profiles Task Force. In the past academic year, students from Lamoille, Orange, and Windsor Counties conducted more than a dozen interviews, which are in the process of being finalized into profiles. At Randolph Technical Career Center, for example, students in the Ag Tech program adapted the F2P curriculum and interviewed three farmers in a panel format to compare their career paths and business models and shared what they learned in a brochure for the school’s Open House.

The Task Force is currently working on expanding the project to allow more flexible formatting and multimedia profiles, and is also finalizing a career guide with detailed information on many different food system jobs. This career development work has also led to two new partnerships. The Career Profiles curriculum is now being offered in collaboration with a VAAFM effort to organize career panels for classrooms and career fairs. In 2018 two panels were held through this partnership, at CCV in Montpelier for high school students throughout Washington County, and in Randolph for students at both the Technical Career Center and High School. In addition, Sodexo’s Vermont First program held a student symposium on October 28th, with input from the Education and Workforce Development Working Group and using the Career Profiles as a key theme.

The Working Group is collaboratively hosting a session at the Gathering, “Field Work: Building Connectivity for Tomorrow’s Food System Workforce,” which will look at experiential opportunities for different types of students and explore how the system will be strengthened. In 2019, the WG, in addition to continuing these existing projects, will be exploring ways to help UVM Extension and the Production & Process Working Group advertise and expand the Dairy Grazing Apprenticeship program.

Cross Cutting Teams

Health

Over the past year, the Health CCT has aligned around the goal of leveraging the healthcare system, whether hospitals, insurance, or other players, to increase access to local food. An October meeting featured an overview by Heidi Klein of VDH of Vermont’s healthcare system structure, and a group discussion on potential strategic levers. Consequently, the CCT is collaboratively drafting proposed strategies around food as medicine to be included in the 2018-2023 update to the Statewide Health Improvement Plan.

In addition, the CCT has been collecting examples of programs from around the state that are related to food and health. Summaries of these projects will be made available as a resource for others throughout the state who are starting a program, looking to improve specific aspects such as local sourcing, or simply want a better understanding of existing resources.

Research

After a hiatus, the Research Cross-Cutting Team is back by popular demand! The co-chairs have been recruiting new members to build capacity for connecting research and service learning coordinators at different schools with research opportunities, in addition to connecting researchers with each other. The CCT held a video call in September for new members and will be hosting regular remote meetings going forward, and recently distributed a list of research questions and ideas that have emerged from Working Group, Task Force, and Cross-Cutting Team meetings. The CCT invites any interested individuals and organizations to join in the effort to connect the research community to the research needs identified in the Farm to Plate Network; contact Molly Anderson and Alison Nihart.
Cross Cutting Teams . . . cont.

**Food Cycle Coalition**

Members of the Food Cycle Coalition have been tracking and participating in a number of conversations happening throughout the state. The FCC began the year with a joint meeting with the Farmland Access and Stewardship Working Group on climate change and carbon sequestration, with representatives from Vermont’s Climate Commission and presentations on examples from other states. The FCC has also discussed the organics management system with Ginger Nickerson, an independent researcher who is interviewing solid waste management workers in Vermont for a collection in the Library of Congress’ Occupational Folklife Project, and is helping to identify interviewees with interesting or inspiring stories. (Interviews from Ginger’s project that relate to the food system will be also be adapted to be included in the Farm to Plate Career Profiles Project.)

On the horizon, the FCC has begun planning a regional event to be hosted in Brattleboro in March. The Coalition is also kicking off a new project, creation of a guide for farms to accept small volumes of food scraps, with dual goals of improving the farmer’s bottom line and helping the state reach the necessary composting capacity. Stay tuned for project updates in 2019, and contact Natasha Duarte if you’re interested in becoming involved.

**Finance**

**Slow Money Vermont** is developing lending, investment, convening, and communication opportunities which connect farm and food enterprises with investors in their communities. In December 2017, Slow Money held their annual entrepreneurial showcase at Main Street Landing in Burlington. Five entrepreneurs presented their stories and business needs to 86 attendees, consisting of investors, service providers, and members of the general public with an interest in investing their dollars locally. Stay informed about the upcoming 2018 Showcase on the Slow Money Vermont Facebook page.

**Food Access**

The **Food Access Planning Task Force** is continuing to work on creation of a new resource to help local and regional planners address food access in their communities. This guide will discuss strategies for involving key stakeholders in the planning process, techniques for incorporating food access within the plans, examples and sample language, and will be designed for both professional and volunteer planners and other interested community members. The project team expects to publish the resource this winter. The Task Force is also presenting a breakout session at the 2018 Network Gathering, “Making food systems change at the local level: Addressing food access through the town and regional planning process,” which will introduce many of the strategies included in the toolkit.

The **Food Justice Subcommittee** has developed an educational toolkit on five different but complimentary approaches to food access: hunger education, hunger relief, food justice, right to food, and food sovereignty. The worksheets included in the toolkit will help organizations classify their own work and identify gaps that could be addressed by developing additional programming or collaborating with outside partners.

In addition to providing input on these projects, the full Cross-Cutting Team has been exploring several other topics, including best practices for incorporating—in group conversations and within individual organizations—the voices of those with lived experience of poverty and hunger; a conversation which will continue into 2019. The CCT is also exploring ways to leverage Rooted in Vermont to communicate with the general public about food access and about the programs of CCT member organizations. The use of Rooted in Vermont marketing language will allow advocates to reach new audiences, reduce stigma around food insecurity, and instead align food access as a key component of Rooted in Vermont’s core tenets of tradition, pride, community, trust, and equity.

**Energy**

The Energy-Cross Cutting Team continues to monitor legal and policy issues concerning solar siting on farmland. The CCT has engaged in discussions with Vermont Law School’s Ag & Energy Initiative, with an interest in identifying or developing model contracts for solar on ag-land, particularly on ag-land that is being grazed. The CCT also has a number of research questions about energy use in the food system it would like to investigate further, including understanding the total energy impact and usage of food system business, the need to better understand transportation efficiency needs of food system businesses, and clarifying land use regulations and agricultural exemptions for indoor “protected-culture” growing.
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Sponsorship dollars are used to help pay stipends for farmers, producers, and entrepreneurs to participate in Farm to Plate meetings and events and make sure their voices are heard in the work taking place to implement Vermont’s Farm to Plate Food System Plan. Funds are also used to incorporate user feedback and new features on the Farm to Plate website (www.VTFarmtoPlate.com) which supports and brings attention to the organizations, farms, businesses, and projects that are working together to strengthen Vermont’s food system. To learn more about becoming a sponsor, please visit www.VTFarmtoPlate.com/support-farm-to-plate