

**Date: October 25, 2012 Meeting with St. Albans Area Farmers**

Attendees: 9 total

These summaries reflect a range of views expressed on the issues as discussed during informal conversation in small focus group meetings. They do not reflect the formal or public position of any one group of people, organization or coalition. All errors and omissions are the sole responsibility of EMC/CBI.

*Italics contain comments from attendees that are indicative of common elements, themes and sentiments expressed. The conversations were not recorded and, therefore, they may not be verbatim quotations.*

**I. What Practices Are You Doing That Improve Water Quality?**

- A. No till practices
- B. Cover crops
- C. Manure injection systems
- D. Tile drains work well with their soil type
- E. Specific comments related to these practices:

The farmers would try more if there was more funding to adopt a newer practice. Farmers want to be good stewards of the land but the money is not available given the cost of production and fluctuating milk prices.

*Most farmers want to do the right thing and care about how they do it. Twenty years ago farmers needed to be convinced to do things but, for example, we got a cost share to put roofs up and now that we have them we appreciate them.*

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*Farmers really need to work on educating each other about what is feasible.*

## **II. What Practices Are Not Working Well?**

### **A. Lack of flexibility:**

1. Programs are available to pay for a specific practice that will address water quality in general but that may not be a good fit for the farm. One farmer noted the experience of having engineers spec the sight and look at the technical issues and discussing why a different solution would work better because of the location but knowing that there is only funding for the less optimal practice and needing to make it work even if a different practice would be better.
2. Farmers need a range of options, one size fits all is not working because farms have different soil types and different systems for management so need different choices.

*Sometimes the cooperation we need is not there, or we are being listened to but the funding is not available to do what we think we need.*

*You also need to think about the fact that if you implement one practice it changes the next thing you do and you adapt another to make it fit the first thing and you need to go step by step to make sure the whole thing works together.*

- ### **B. Paperwork: one farmer noted that the hoops that they had to jump through scared them off of a particular program.**

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### C. Lack of Support

*Sometimes I think that if something is going to work really well it is not something that is promoted or something people are hearing about. It sounds a little crazy but it's like they don't want farmers to succeed and be viable.*

### D. Resource/Program Mismatch

One farmer said he was bothered by the fact that farmers got money for planting corn but that he got nothing for keeping his land in grass.

### E. Manure Spreading Ban

1. Having a nutrient management plan was helpful but farmers expressed frustration when conditions on the farm due to weather did not line up with the management practices in the plan. For example where it was too dry at the wrong time or too wet. The dates of the ban do not necessarily match the conditions on the farm and it results in spreading at the wrong time or spreading sooner or later than a farmer knows it should be done for better outcomes.

*It is so stupid to be out there when the weather is not good but to have to do it because the time is running out.*

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2. Another farmer noted the ban has been in place for a long time and wondered whether it needed to be reviewed in light of climate change.
3. Another said while it was possible to get a permit to spread outside the ban period it was hard to do that more than once. It was not worth the reaction from the agency, which discouraged the farmer from making any other requests in the future and from community, where the date of the ban is known and led to the farmer having to field calls about the situation.

### **III. Feedback on Practices, Regulations & Ideas to Improve Water Quality**

- A. Nutrient management plans for smaller farms: supported by the focus group.
  1. It would encourage all farms to follow suit to adopt practices that improve water quality.
  2. Would work better if it allowed farmers to adopt a suite of practices that they have the option to select for what will work best for their farm. There were lots of advantages seen with this approach.
  3. The draw back was the lack of state personnel to enforce the program because it needs to be flexible and customized for each farm and therefore required more technical assistance to review options and to follow up on the farms.
  4. Some thought the 590 plan was too much work for a smaller farm, there also needed to be a lot of education about the plan.
  5. Comments about needing a ranking system no need to have every farm have to do these plans, there needs to be a cut off above which the farm does it, below which the farm does not need to.

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6. One farmer raised the idea of a system where smaller farms register in the town —if a person needs a dog license why not one for other animals? Towns are not permitted to regulate agriculture therefore others believed that this structure would not work.
7. Other farms besides dairy needed management plans like vegetable farmers – there is a lot of phosphorous on the land and they may not have the soil testing to help them understand the nutrient value or how rotting plants, compost adds to that and whether that is a good or bad idea to add in to the soil.
8. Concern expressed over the fact that the FAP funding came out of the same pool of funds as the nutrient management plan funds and that if all farms were required to have a nutrient management plan then cover crop funds may not be available and questioned whether this would result in improved water quality because the funding may have been more effective if spent on critical uses.
9. Farmers wanted to be sure there was a cost/benefit analysis done to determine that the practices were going to allocate resources in the most effective way.

*If the goal is to clean up the environment and you are telling the guy with one cow he has to have a nutrient management plan, then that better be an awfully messy cow.*

*What constitutes a farm? Who decides?*

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*If you want smaller farmers to implement programs you have to make them easier and simpler because we just don't have the time or the people in place – it is not a lack of willingness but a lack of time.*

B. Inspections on the farms and increased enforcement would be helpful.

1. Farmers noted that there was a lack of data on smaller farm operations and that they needed to be brought under regulatory umbrella too but there needed to be a way to find them.
2. Discussed having some categories for how to determine who needs to be regulated and how they needed to be regulated. Discussion of how to categorize farms—not just about how many animals you have also about density – amount of land and amount of animals determined what could be absorbed on the land.

*Hobby people compete with people that are actually trying to make a living at this and where the things hobby farmers are doing creates problems for farmers and everyone else it raises the costs on the farms trying to run businesses so they also need to be held accountable like we are.*

*The issue is not on MFOs or LFOs we are educated about water quality and have good practices there are only 170 farms and they are regulated. What about the other 6,000 farms in the state who are not doing their part?*

C. Livestock exclusion- was seen as having potential problems if it was a blanket ban.

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1. In the flood plains there was no point to putting up fencing if it was knocked down every year and washed away.
2. Concern that it would impact snowmobiling and VAST would not like it.
3. Need to make sure that there is another source of water available and may need a cost share for that part of it as well.
4. One person noted the AAPs would need to be redrafted because it says that the livestock cannot trample the stream but not that livestock needed to be excluded.
5. Hunters would not be happy—used to traveling on certain land and being able to do so with no fence or barrier.

*Don't we have bigger things to focus on than this issue?*

*We need to pick and choose the best places to spend the money. Is this the best thing to do?*

*Could you make it a requirement in critical source areas and provide education in other areas and let the farmers figure out how to address the issue on their own farms?*

*This is a big issue in terms of community relations. When there is a cow in a stream, everyone sees it and there is a lot of talk and if the cow is in the stream then they call in and so it does need to be taken care of. It makes it hard for the*

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*public to see all the good things we have on farms that are addressing water quality if the image is a cow standing there and [messing] in the stream.*

#### D. Ditches and Buffer Zones

1. Consensus was that implementing ditch maintenance and using buffer zones was effective and buffers reduce amount of pollution conveyed by ditches.
2. Farmers expressed the need for more flexibility in farm by farm cases that would allow common sense application of buffer zones and ditch maintenance to respond to the specific conditions on their particular farm.
3. Support for the effectiveness of installing tile drains
4. Discussion on issues around who made the decision regarding what a farmer needed to do with the ditch. For example, should it be cleared regularly or fill with vegetation, and what size buffer was needed. Clarification on whether conservation or state made the decisions because once the call was made, the farmer had to maintain it in accordance with the directive. Not all ditches are the same, not all ditches on a farm are the same.
5. Discussion on perennial streams, who had the authority to regulate them, how would a farmer know whether to clear it, leave it alone, etc.
6. Without better education and information farmers run the risk of being fined if they do maintenance on a ditch and did the wrong thing.

*Farmers know their land, you will be better off if you ask a farmer whether this is an issue on the farm for him and if he agrees then he will cooperate more and you*

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*will get better compliance rather than just telling him it's a problem when you might talk to him and decide it might not be one.*

- E. What about allowing for a longer manure spread time if the farmer put in a fall cover crop? Generally a positive.
1. Some noted that if it were wet spreading on the cover crop would not be effective if the crop didn't have roots in place.
  2. Another farmer noted that cover crops for some soils would not work because what they needed was fall tilling and there was no sense putting in a cover crop.
  3. Another option of flexible buffers was discussed. Met with positive response where a farm that did not plant a fall crop had to have a larger buffer area whereas a farm that planted a cover crop could stick with a standard sized buffer.
- F. Outreach and education on AAPs for more small farms supported.
1. Farmers noted that conditions on some "hobby" or backyard farms were terrible.
  2. Favored more education on good practices but difficult to get information to the people that needed it most.
  3. Could withhold funds if the farmer doesn't attend or require a permit over certain levels and make the classes mandatory.
  4. Discussed making sure the education is tailored to what was needed because most of what commercial farmers need to know is not what hobby farmers will need to know, for them it could be too much or the wrong kind of information.

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5. Discussion of different levels of farmers even in hobby farm category, someone with one or two animals not on the same footing as someone with ten or fifteen.

*Need to publicize classes, ask vets and feed stores to pass out information on the classes. People don't want to do the wrong thing and are good about doing the right thing when they know how to do it.*

*People will come if it helps them be more successful or if they know they are having an environmental impact.*

- G. Ban growing corn in the flood plain- for some farms it would be economic issue and would cause serious financial burden. Others said that it would be acceptable to have a practice that created an incentive to not grow corn in a critical source area. The incentive could either take that area out of production or make another area more productive in exchange.
- H. Unequal allocation of resources was seen as a necessary way to have funding used where most needed.
  1. One farmer expressed a concern that if you couldn't cost share cover crops, then the planting would not get done.
  2. Idea of a sliding scale cost share was seen as a better solution where cover crops in impaired areas received a higher cost share and in less impaired areas less of a cost share.

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*You can't please everybody and need to focus on the really important things.*

*This is a situation where if you asked me who my favorite child was I would tell you my favorite child is the one that is sick and that is the one that will get the attention.*

#### **IV. Discussion of a Certainty Program**

- A. Hard to understand the value of it. Farmers not sold on the idea that there would be a guarantee that would be meaningful. The consequences would need to be understood.

*You are asking how much farmers value certainty-- but certainty compared to what?*

- B. The implementation time frame was an issue. Where the practices had to be implemented over time, the farmer is committing to a series of practices that he must undertake no matter what but he commits to it in year one and may not be able to get resources from the program to get the practice until later.

*The industry is too volatile. It is too hard to ask a farmer to do these things if in the middle of the program he has a bad year and there is no money what happens?*

*Sounds like a plan but in reality it is a contract.*

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*Is this going to be like Equip program where it was a 7-8 year wait to do the practice and the cost went up—I think it doubled and we didn't get any more cost share. We need to do the work in the year we signed up for it.*

- C. One farmer raised a regulatory issue of the problem that in some cost shares where a farmer has already agreed to adopt a practice then he is not eligible for a cost share payment because where he is already committed to do it, it cannot be funded.
  
- D. Farmers like the idea of a flexible point or ranking system where there was credit for practices already implemented and where a series of practices had point values and the farmer could pick and choose the practices that made the most sense for his farm and could choose how to get the required number of points.

*It's fine to have a consistent program that is clear about the rules but it should have some flexibility.*

*It would need to be flexible to be modifiable due to weather conditions and changes that may happen. What if you had a practice and it wasn't working for your farm, the levels did not come down then what?*

- E. Discussed the idea of what incentives would work well and a “farm of distinction” award for those farms that are using good practices and have met water quality standards was seen as a positive idea.

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1. To make it meaningful, it would need to be a state backed program with some merit to it. Public should connect what it means to have that plaque on a farm, there needs to be a roll out for the program that is out to everyone in the state and then farms will want to go along with the program.
2. Discussed the idea that it could be taken away if the farm no longer met the standards. This ensured the distinction meant something over time. The idea that it could be taken away generated a definite reaction.

*That answers a big question—how important is this to farmers? Farmers are proud.*

3. The recognition should also have some benefit as well, such as a higher priority for a new program or a higher cost share amount or some ranking where having more “points” for implementing practices on a farm meant something tangible.

#### F. Public Awareness of the Program

1. Farmers were all aware that they were being focused on as part of a problem and that did not feel good when they have done a lot of work on implementing programs to improve water quality on their farms.
2. Many farms are in highly visible locations and want to have great relations with their communities.
3. Need to publicize their successes and acknowledge the work they have done.

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*A concern is no matter what program is done that it cannot be underfunded. There is a public conversation that happens and expectations are created around the perception that we need to do more and there needs to be funding for that in place.*

**V. Discussion on Other Ideas**

- A. Nutrient Trading Program: interest but the details would need more discussion.
  
- B. Concern that the good water quality management farming practices currently being used are working but that this may not be the issue.

*What about the fact that the impact on the waterways is a legacy issue? Impact was done 50 years ago or more and feels like no matter how much we do it won't resolve the real issue.*

<b>Commonly Used Agricultural Terms</b>	
<b>Acronym</b>	<b>Definition</b>
BMPs	Best Management Practices
FAPs	Farm Agronomic Practices
TMDL	Total Maximum Daily Load
LCB	Lake Champlain Basin
AAPs	Accepted Agricultural Practice regulations
MFOs	Medium Farm Operations (200-699 mature animals)
LFOs	Large Farm Operations (700+ mature animals)

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