

Legislature focuses on farms

[Kathryn Flagg Addison County agriculture legislature](#)

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ADDISON COUNTY ? Lawmakers and farmers? advocates are saying that compromise and the importance of economic development programs rose to the forefront this year in the discussion about farm policy in Montpelier.

Agricultural policies that cleared the House and Senate this winter included new rules for farmers? markets; an overhaul of the Current Use program (see story, Page 1); small rules changes for the dairy industry; renewed funding for the ?Farm to Plate? economic development plan; and the formation of a livestock care advisory committee, stronger penalties for slaughterhouse abuses, and the creation of a statewide agricultural development director, among other changes.

?If there was a theme throughout the year, it was heavy on compromise and heavy on budget,? said Brian Moyer, the executive director of farmer advocacy group Rural Vermont. Moyer?s organization closely followed both the Current Use legislation and S.295, the bill that established the livestock care advisory committee and tightened slaughterhouse rules.

Meanwhile, Rep. Will Stevens, I-Shoreham, pointed out that many of this year?s agricultural bills hinged on economic development. S.295, which expanded to include humane treatment issues, at its core was a piece of legislation designed to create a new position for a statewide agricultural development director.

Stevens, a member of the House Agriculture Committee, said passage of that bill might have been one of the most significant ones on the ag front that the Legislature made this year, particularly considered alongside lawmakers? decision to extend funding for the ?Farm to Plate? program now in its second year of identifying local foods development opportunities in Vermont.

In a time when financial concerns took the lead at the Statehouse, Stevens said linking economic development and agricultural issues was imperative this year.

Stevens was the lead sponsor on another agricultural development bill, H.725, that aims to strengthen farmers? markets in the state. The bill creates statutory definitions for farmers? markets, acknowledges the Vermont Farmers? Market Association (VFMA), and puts the role of governing farmers? markets in the VFMA?s hands. Stevens said that with the number of markets in the state around 85 and growing, the bill will give producers and the VFMA the power to regulate markets without bringing state-level interference into the picture.

?It?s my hope that this is a Vermont approach to it,? Stevens said. ?You let the people take care of it themselves, and the market will sort itself out.?

are estimated to bring in more than \$7 million annually.

In other farm policy, the Legislature this year passed legislation introduced two years ago by Sen. Harold Giard, D-Bridport, to transfer the financial burden of milk hauling charges from farmers to milk purchasers.

?For many farms that amounts to thousands if not tens of thousands of dollars a year,? Stevens said.

In amending the 2008 bill, the Legislature mandated that milk buyers take on the costs ? but only if New York adopts similar legislation, a measure lawmakers hope will mean Vermont farmers won?t be dropped by milk purchasers because of the hauling fees.

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