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ADDISON COUNTY — A new, statewide body to spur innovations in Vermont’s agricultural industry is set to begin work.

The Agricultural Development Board, which was created during the 2010 legislative session under Act 158 and includes five Addison County members, will address a range of agricultural topics. The act stipulates that the 12-person board is “the state’s primary agricultural development entity,” and charges it with making recommendations to state agencies, the governor, the general assembly and the University of Vermont Extension Service that will further Vermont’s agricultural sector.

“There needs to be a framework to adapt to change, to encourage new ventures,” said Bob Rathbun, manager of the Seedway facility in Shoreham and a member of the new board.

Ag Development Board members — five of whom are appointed by the governor, four by the house, and four by the senate — all represent different areas of the agricultural field. The local members are:

- Rathbun, who manages Seedway, a large-scale farm, garden and turf seed distributor, with locations in New York, Vermont, Pennsylvania and Florida.
- Lynn Coale, director of the Patricia A. Hannaford Career Center in Middlebury.
- Jon Rooney, president of Monument Farms Dairy in Weybridge.
- Sam Cutting Jr. of Dakin Farm, a Ferrisburgh-based purveyor of Vermont-made foods.
- Len Bull, a retired professor who lives in New Haven.

Last week those five, along with the seven others, were preparing for the board’s first meeting, which will take place late this month or early next month.

“The board is designed to provide Vermont with a planning mechanism that can carry agricultural interests forward,” explained Rep. Will Stevens (I-Shoreham), a member of the house agriculture committee, which sponsored the bill.

The board, he said, will likely address the Vermont Seal of Quality, fluctuating milk prices, the Farm to Plate initiative, and other hot-button topics in agriculture.

The one drawback, said Stevens, is that the board is unfunded.

“That would have been a deal breaker, with the (current) financial situation,” said Stevens.

“Agriculture has always tried to live within its means,” he added.

He cited a 2008 University of Vermont study in which 97 percent of Vermonters interviewed said that they valued the state’s working landscape and its heritage. Because agriculture has such a large role to play in the state’s economy, history, and its character, he said it is important to have a group watching and analyzing the trends, and recommending ways to improve the industry.

“Let’s do something that will actually speak to the integrity of our agricultural practices, and make a commitment,” said Stevens.

“I’m planning to go in with a completely open mind,” said Rathbun, who also ran a Shoreham dairy farm for 35 years.

Coale said he sees agricultural education as one area that can help propel new ideas in agriculture to the forefront.

“Agricultural education has been built and maintained on a legacy,” he said. “Our challenge is to develop programs that will appeal to non-farm students.”

Coale, whose family still owns a ranch in Wyoming, said that the field of agriculture is always changing, and that new markets — like local foods — can spring up and become driving forces in agriculture very quickly.

“The intriguing thing about this council is that we’ll be looking at markets,” said Coale. “I’m really interested in the dialog.”

Monument Farms’ Rooney will bring the perspective of his family’s successful, 80-year-old dairy farm. He cautioned that the board will need to work hard to be effective in its tasks.

“It’s not a new process, but (we’ll) be reaching far and wide to gather information,” he said. “I certainly hope that we can be somewhat effective in putting together ideas that can help.”

Bull chaired the animal science department at the University of Vermont between 1981 and 1989. Though he later moved to North Carolina before retiring to Vermont, Bull said that his acquaintance with agricultural systems in other areas of the country has given him some insight into the reasons why agricultural movements function or fail.

“It’s important that we look at what agriculture, in the broadest sense, can be, and what will bring the most stability,” he said.

He and the other nominees emphasized the importance that creativity and innovation would have in the process — not simply looking at where agriculture can go forward, but at what can be changed.

“There needs to be a framework to adapt to change and encourage new ventures,” said Rathbun. “The more diversity we have, the better off we are.”

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