

Building community equity in the forests and fields of Vermont

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This research began with a question about the effects of private conservation by land trusts on public access to an increasingly conserved and privatized landscape. Can land trusts create a commons on private property? The study will focus on Addison and Essex Counties, the former a central western lake valley dairy farming area, and the latter a remote, northeastern forestry region. Research has expanded an initial conception of access beyond recreational use to include access to land-based livelihoods, such as logging and farming. It has also drawn attention to the permissions and restrictions on the terms of mobility and use by different groups within Vermont's landscapes. The investigation currently focuses on the intersection with private conservation of two groups: farm/forest landowners and farm laborers.

Farm/forest landowners: Placing easements on the land often allows farmers to stay in business, refinance, or expand their operation through the purchase of additional acreage. In the statewide Vermont Land Trust, members tend to be the larger, more prosperous dairy operations; indeed, a high proportion of large farms in Addison County are in the Vermont Land Trust. In Essex County, large tracts of former industrial forestlands have been placed under easement, and the effects on public access have been contentious.

This aspect of the research is being conducted in collaboration with Vermont Family Forests (VFF). Their mission is to work for sustainable forest management by building awareness to promote "a community-shared land ethic," fostering local participation and control, and broadening access to sustainable forestland ownership beyond higher-income early adopters of conservation practices (VFF 2000-2004). VFF networks over 40 landowners and 10,000 wooded acres in sustainable management and Forest Stewardship Council-certified harvesting. VFF's Little Hogback Community Forest initiative uses an easement to enable a share-based forestry model. VFF is conducting a survey of 1000 woodland owners in Addison and Essex Counties.

Farm/forest laborers: We suspect that a significant and increasing proportion of farms under easement are dependent on undocumented labor, as they strive to maintain farm livelihoods, the working landscape, and to reproduce in perpetuity the rural character of Vermont. While the majority of migrant laborers are still U.S. citizens, information from the Vermont Migrant Education Program suggests that over the last five years two to three hundred Mexican migrant laborers have come to Addison County, primarily to fill a shortage of workers willing to work long shifts on large dairy farms, year-round. These workers provide critical labor, but are heavily policed and isolated by language, and so have minimal mobility within and knowledge of the landscape they help to maintain and reproduce. Research on this issue must dis-locate findings, so as not to endanger workers or their employers.

The Vermont Migrant Education Program (VMEP) looks for farmworkers who have moved to seek or obtain work in agriculture. VMEP serves children and young adults to the age of 22, offering many free educational services to eligible families and working closely with local and state agencies to offer referrals. VMEP is finding a rapidly growing population of Mexican migrant workers, the majority younger men (17-22) and adult men. There are now also about 20 children under age 17 and about 30 women in Addison County. Most of the local communities were not aware of the Mexican population until the women and children arrived and started trying to obtain information about schooling, healthcare, and other resources in the community.

Although these workers have arrived at different times the majority of them come from four areas in Mexico (Tabasco, Chiapas, Veracruz, and Playa Vicente). Many of the workers are related and return to the same farms with more of their families, providing the farmers with steady and reliable help. Farming is a tough job and almost all of the farmers VMEP deals with say that if they did not have Mexicans working for them, they might be forced out of agriculture.

Most workers are undocumented and thus isolated to the specific areas where they work. They seem to have very few resources in matters of healthcare, education, literacy, and basic human rights. VMEP recruiters try to assist them in any way they can. A countywide coalition of community action partners from health and human service organizations have now seen the growing population and are willing to help.