



Vermont State Workforce Development Board

Agriculture Committee - Meeting Minutes

March 15th, 2022

9:00 am – 10:00 pm

Committee Members in Attendance: Brian Carpenter, Kiersten Bourgeois, Alyson Eastman, David Lynn, Joe Tisbert, Shannon Harrison

Guests in Attendance: Victoria Biondolillo, Abigail Rhim

Executive Director Victoria Biondolillo called the meeting to order at 9:05 am. She gave a brief summary of the purpose of the committee. This includes identifying problems and solutions within the agriculture sector to address the workforce crisis in Vermont. She also mentioned developing an action plan for this committee to understand what direction the committee would like to move in. She then opened the floor to introductions.

Alyson Eastman, Deputy Secretary of Agriculture, Food and Markets

David Lynn, Senior Vice President and Top Operations Officer of Agri-Mark/Cabot Creamery, Inc.

Kiersten Bourgeois, Manager for Communications and Industry Affairs of Dairy Farmers of America

Joe Tisbert, President of Vermont Farm Bureau, Owner of Valley Dream Farm

Shannon Harrison, Chief of Staff of the Abbey Group & owner/operator of large sugaring operation

Brian Carpenter, President and General Manager of Champlain Valley Equipment

Executive Director Victoria Biondolillo started the conversation asking members what they are hoping to get out of these conversations, specifically, a direction they want to see the committee go regarding workforce.

Joe Tisbert noted the inability for farmers to get valuable labor. His company works with H-2A visas and while it is expensive, his business would likely be unable to function without those workers. As farming continues to be an unpopular field in the workforce, he wants to focus on developing a stable labor supply.

Alyson Eastman highlighted what changes we can make, right now. There are a lot of questions regarding immigrant worker programs, including recruiting workers from Puerto Rico. While the process is confusing, if we can make the process more manageable for farmers, they can take advantage of that labor supply and create stability in the industry. She used the Vermont apple industry as an example. Using H-2A visas, workers relocate for 10 months and provide critical services that provide stability throughout the entire industry. She concluded by stating that there are many good programs and

resources on the state and federal level to connected workers to jobs, farmers just need help interpreting them.

Executive Director Victoria Biondolillo highlighted how with agricultural work, there is less mobility in the population to pick up and work at a farm. She added that it is a different type of recruiting and while there are tools available to help with the recruitment process, it is hard to navigate the system. One committee goal can be to create an outreach plan or simplified version to pitch to farmers in order to understand the resources available to them. For example, we could use some dollars to create a marketing plan to ensure resources are provided to help farmers understand recruitment and retainment processes.

Alyson Eastman returned to the Vermont apple orchard example and the use of H-2A and H-2B visas. Unlike domestic workers, if you have a worker who comes on a visa, they likely don't bring their family and are able to take an early morning or evening shift, a traditional pinch point for a domestic worker who might have to take their child to school.

David Lynn then mentioned that for Cabot, regarding sourcing workers, they have been trying to tap into Puerto Rican workers through a national hiring service. Although, initially, they were able to recruit workers from around the country, a few months in, folks would say that there is no housing or it too expensive to live in Vermont. He reflected on his very limited success recruiting due to housing, even if the job is great.

Executive Director Victoria Biondolillo mentioned ARPA funding and the hopes of using the funding for larger statewide issues like housing.

Kiersten Bourgeois asked for clarification on what agriculture includes within the committee's context. What is our scope of agriculture?

Executive Director Victoria Biondolillo stated that she sees the scope to include anyone who has a hand in agriculture goods and how we look at each portion of the supply chain in the sector.

Alyson Eastman, returning to H-2A visas and CDLs, asked about the minimum age. She went on to say that workplace learning in high schools is a valuable place to spark interest in young people entering the workforce, however, if obstacles like the minimum age of a CDL are in the way, we are unable to tap into potential workers. She has seen many kids who are taking very light course loads their second semester, senior year, who could be getting hours of experience through an apprenticeship.

Kiersten Bourgeois then mentioned the hurdle of insurance.

Executive Director Victoria Biondolillo reiterated the need for a sustainable pipeline. She asked the group what our plan of attack moving forward should look like.

Joe Tisbert said he doesn't think we can start in just one place. The entire system ties together. If you look at the whole agriculture industry, you need truckers, farm workers, the shop to sell goods in, and more. As far as drivers and CDLs, can the state provide funding to help bring people in? We need to make it more affordable to bring people in and get trained in these positions.

Executive Director Victoria Biondolillo asked if a visualization of the supply chain would be helpful. If we can address the various pinch points along the way, would that be productive at our next meeting?

Alyson Eastman thought a visual would be helpful. She also stressed the idea that there are ways to make impactful change, now. We just need to identify those areas. For example, the state currently pays for dual enrollment where kids go to college their senior year of high school. Why can't the state help engage with students who wish to be involved in manufacturing at 17 or 18. If we can funnel them into the workforce and train them when they have a lighter course load senior year, we can then free up individuals already in the workforce to do other jobs.

Kiersten Bourgeois asked if Mat Barewicz of the Economic and Labor Market Information Division of Vermont Department of Labor could list available jobs in certain fields. If we could see the back-end data, that information might give us a better roadmap to address needs.

Executive Director Victoria Biondolillo agreed that it is a numbers game and with data, we can have some useful targets. She will ask him to gather some data for the committee's next meeting, with the hopes that we can get a good visual of what the system looks like from farm to seller. We can then identify pinch points and start to address.

David Lynn suggested that committee members watch Ron Hetrick's video titled, *the Demographic Drought*.

Shannon Harrison then returned to Alyson's point of engaging with high school students. Over the last 5 years on her sugaring farm, she has had very successful experiences with high school students who have come to work and ended up becoming employees after graduation.

Alyson Eastman was very excited to hear that. She stressed the need, as a state, to start recognizing and giving credit to trade works, whether that be via surveys or resumes.

Executive Director Victoria Biondolillo agreed with Alyson. She asked for any further questions or concerns.

The meeting was then adjourned at 9:37

Respectfully submitted by Abby Rhim

Abby Rhim, Executive Assistant

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