

Rural Economic Development Working Group (REDWnG), Vermont House of Representatives

Mari Omland, Green Mountain Girls Farm Testimony, December 11, 2019

I am Mari Omland and together with my wife Laura Olsen, I own Green Mountain Girls Farm in Northfield. We are a hill farm and our agritourism business is built within and upon the rich culture of Vermont's working landscape and verdant ecosystems. We grow food in ways that capture the greatest potential of the sun and natural systems. We catch water where it falls and hold it in place with life! We share the promise of regenerative agriculture selling our fruits, vegetables and pasture-raised meats in our farmstand and farmshares as well as via farmstays and experiences.

Like most farms we know, we have benefited greatly from VHCB's Farm Viability Program's business advisory program which gave us confidence as mid-career transplants repatriating to Vermont and launching our first entrepreneurial venture. Our decade of success has been made possible also by spectacular learning opportunities led by UVM Extension, NOFA, the Grass Farmers Association, Vermont Land Trust and Rural Vermont. We also applaud the Vermont Sustainable Jobs Fund coordinated Farm to Plate Network which has elevated collaboration and performance across our farming community. The web portal DigInVT, curated by the Vermont Fresh Network is another essential community-wide contributor. Finally, we are excited to be one of the farms piloting with the Department of Agriculture's new Ecosystem Services Program, aka VESP.

Small, diverse ecological farms like ours have struggled with viability for decades. We find we cannot hold our stringent social and ecological values and be profitable. Yet, a decade into experimenting we like what we see. Our soils show evidence of rapid cycling of carbon. Plants show resistance to pests and disease. Elderly neighbors credit us with "knitting our community together". We have invested over \$2 million in local supplies, staff and contractors. Together with all these folks, we witness social and ecological wealth accumulating on the farm.

I moved back to Vermont twelve years ago, after two decades away, hoping to one day sit in your shoes. But having run a retail farmstand I know my skin is too thin! I so appreciate the work this caucus does and all of the legislature's work to look after the most vulnerable in our state. You work hard to allocate a fair budget out of funds insufficient to meet all needs. That said, many programs are the equivalent of playing defense.

I am here to report your investments in all the good programs and organizations I mentioned not only merit your continued support but also increased investment. Actual state dollars spent on our farm are few but they enable us to harness the power of the sun to provide clean nutrient dense food year-round without harm to our watersheds, while deepening topsoil and storing increasing amounts of carbon. Simultaneously we attract visitor dollars that, together with our personal contributions, create an ROI for the state of Vermont that if we could name the % would be a staggeringly successful investment.

Laura and I see a future within which Vermont persists as a global geotourism\* leader and as a place where farms succeed by working with natural cycles, providing healthy food, creating stronger rural communities and linking us with humanity as we attempt to bridge current divides and solve the global syndemic of obesity, under-nourishment, chronic disease and climate change. We are inspired by young people who work and shop at our farm as they stand together with Greta Thunberg, Time's Person of the Year, striking out, living and spending with strong values of wellness, social fairness and ecological responsibility.

In addition to your work create and sustain legislative programming to grow and sustain rural communities I want to embolden you all as leaders to reframe how we all think about Vermont's potential.

Young twin girls visited our farm from London with their CEO dad and sophisticated mom recently. One blurted out “this is more fun than our house in Bali!” To which the twin added with emphasis, “and it has 3 pools!” We cherish our hill farms but do we think of them competing with 3 pools in an opulent home in Bali? Look how much Lawson’s gets for a “Sip of Sunshine”... Can we sell our slice of sunshine at an equivalent price differential as our bold brothers in craft brews?

My parents met in the early 1950s, skinning up Pico before the t-bar, North America’s first alpine ski lift. In terms of agritourism development I suspect Vermont may be at the point we were with the ski industry in the 1960s. Vermont has been selected to host the 2<sup>nd</sup> Global Agritourism gathering in the fall of 2020 and you will be hearing about preparations underway. The first Agritourism World Congress was hosted in Italy, 2 years back, and UVM Extension led the bid for Vermont to host the 2020 gathering. It is time for Vermont to comprehend our potential and capture the possibilities alive within the authenticity of our working lands and functioning ecosystems. Can we be the birthplace and epicenter of regenerative agritourism? Can we invest adequately to tap *Ski Vermont* type potential in regenerative agritourism?

In the meantime, may I recommend one 90 minute act to further feed your inner working lands geek and double up with multi-generation family time or even a romantic date over the holidays prior to the being in session? Consider watching [\*The Biggest Little Farm\*](#), an acclaimed film popularizing regenerative farming. This film along with the emergence of strong youth voices heralds a new era. Critics have said the film “punches above its weight by a bushel and a peck”. So does Greta. So does Vermont. Play offense. Invest in the strength of our working lands and ecological wholeness, the authenticity and essence which is Vermont’s brand. Lead on! And thanks for all your listening.

P.S. If touring our farm might be helpful for any members or committees at any point or if the caucus needs an inspirational spot to gather within 15 minutes of Montpelier or if we can provide photos or additional information or be of use in any other way, we are ready.

(\**Geotourism = tourism that sustains or enhances the geographical character of a place—its environment, culture, aesthetics, heritage, and the well-being of its residents.*)