

The Vermonters' Guide to the Farm Bill

Written by Olivia A. Peña in partial fulfillment of
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Guide Overview

The Farm Bill is a comprehensive set of laws and programs that dictates United States policies across the food system. While it may seem that a *farm* bill is only related to agriculture, this legislation, in reality, includes a broad set of policies on food production, nutrition assistance, rural community development, research, the environment, international trade, and more. Often known as a farm and food bill, the legislation impacts food systems stakeholders, including those who farm, live in a rural community, and even those who eat food—so that is everyone.

Considering the widespread impacts of the Farm Bill, it is important for citizens to share their voice and opinions as our congressional representatives redraft the next version of food and agricultural policy. Congress creates a new Farm Bill approximately every five years. Before the bill is signed into law, Congress looks to the communities whom they represent across the country to express their thoughts on the current state of the food system.

Federal policy has implications for every state. The federal Farm Bill has vast impacts in Vermont. Funding for various programs ranging from the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (known in state as 3Squares Vermont), rural broadband support, farm to school grants, sustainable agriculture research and extension, beginning farmer programs, and the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP)—to name a few.

The purpose of this guide is to help Vermonters understand the Farm Bill, what Farm Bill advocacy looks like in Vermont, and a synopsis of ways that Vermonters can get involved in the policy development process and have their voices heard. This guide is politically neutral, and does not seek to advise readers on specific issues for which they should advocate. With the input of various Vermont stakeholder organizations from across the state in addition to congressional staff members, this guide serves to support individuals throughout Vermont to get involved in Farm Bill policy discussions.

I. What is the Farm Bill?

Every five years or so, Congress is tasked with reworking the rules and programs that constitute food and agricultural policy in the United States, known as the **Farm Bill**¹ (refer to Appendix 1 for definitions in the glossary). It is important to keep in mind that food and agriculture function within a system, often known as the “agrifood system” or “food system.” These systems include much more than crop production and the food that one might buy at a grocery store. Thus, given the nature of the food system, the Farm Bill encompasses a broad scope of policies. The Farm Bill is considered an **omnibus** bill based on this, because it is a comprehensive piece of legislation that includes many topics. These topics are organized into **titles**, with each title addressing a different area, though they are often interconnected and related to other titles. The titles vary in each new Farm Bill, but this guide will discuss titles that are proposed to be included in the 2018 bill (see Box 1).

Box 1. Brief summary of titles

- I. **Commodities:** dictates price supports for commonly produced crops such as corn, soy, wheat, rice, sugar, and dairy
- II. **Conservation:** offers programs that incentivize the adoption of beneficial environmental practices in farming operations
- III. **Trade:** covers programs that direct international food assistance and exports
- IV. **Nutrition:** regulates domestic food assistance programs that support low-income Americans, such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), formerly known as the food stamp program
- V. **Credit:** offers and regulates government loans to farmers to access credit as loans
- VI. **Rural Development:** includes programs that support rural communities and the development of businesses, infrastructure, and housing
- VII. **Research:** supports the expansion of research and extension work that increases public knowledge of new agricultural innovations and practices
- VIII. **Forestry:** regulates the management and stewardship of forests and resources
- IX. **Horticulture:** includes programs that support the production and marketing of specialty crops, including organic production
- X. **Crop Insurance:** regulates the funding of programs that offer insurance policies for farmers’ crops
- XI. **Miscellaneous:** a catch-all for various other food and farm issues such as support programs for socially disadvantaged farmers, livestock production, and animal health

The Farm Bill is **reauthorized**, or renewed, with varying amounts of modifications approximately every five years. See Figure 1 to understand how a bill becomes a law. The

¹ **What is the Farm Bill?** R. Johnson, <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/misc/RS22131.pdf>

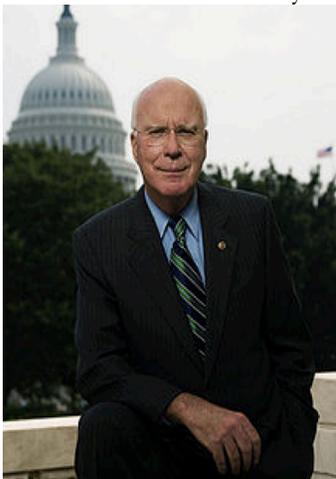
frequency of readdressing national food and farm policy allows Congress to assess the impacts of programs and regulations with a few years by which to judge them. Once reauthorized, the Farm Bill is in effect for roughly five years at a time. If the Farm Bill expires before Congress passes a new one, programs that are mandatory will continue to be funded based on the previous amount of allotted money, while other programs may lose funding until a new bill is signed into law.

Money is assigned to programs under one of two methods: mandatory or discretionary funding. **Mandatory** spending means that the federal government is obligated to fund some programs operating at a **baseline**, or minimum, amount of money². This leads mandatory programs to be entitled to a pre-set amount of funding. **Discretionary** spending refers to an allotted amount of money based on the capacity of a program, but the amount of spending will vary each year based on an assessment of appropriations. As one of the many committees in Congress, the **appropriations** committee determines how much money is allocated to federal programs each year.

The most important committees involved in writing the Farm Bill are House and Senate Agricultural committees. In each of the two chambers of Congress, the Agricultural committees are tasked with drafting and debating the contents of the Farm Bill. Congressional representatives in the House and Senate Agricultural committees hold hearings throughout the country and in DC regarding the Farm Bill, though they aren't the only ones seeking input. Vermont's congressional **delegation** (see box 2) is attentive to the perspectives and opinions of citizens. This guide will outline best practices in Vermont for voices to be heard and successful ways advocate for Farm Bill policies and programs.

Box 2. Vermont Congressional Representatives

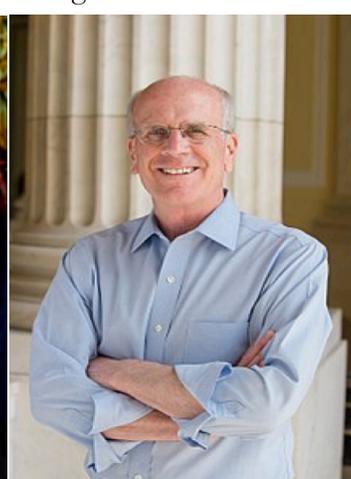
Senator Patrick Leahy



Senator Bernie Sanders



Congressman Peter Welch

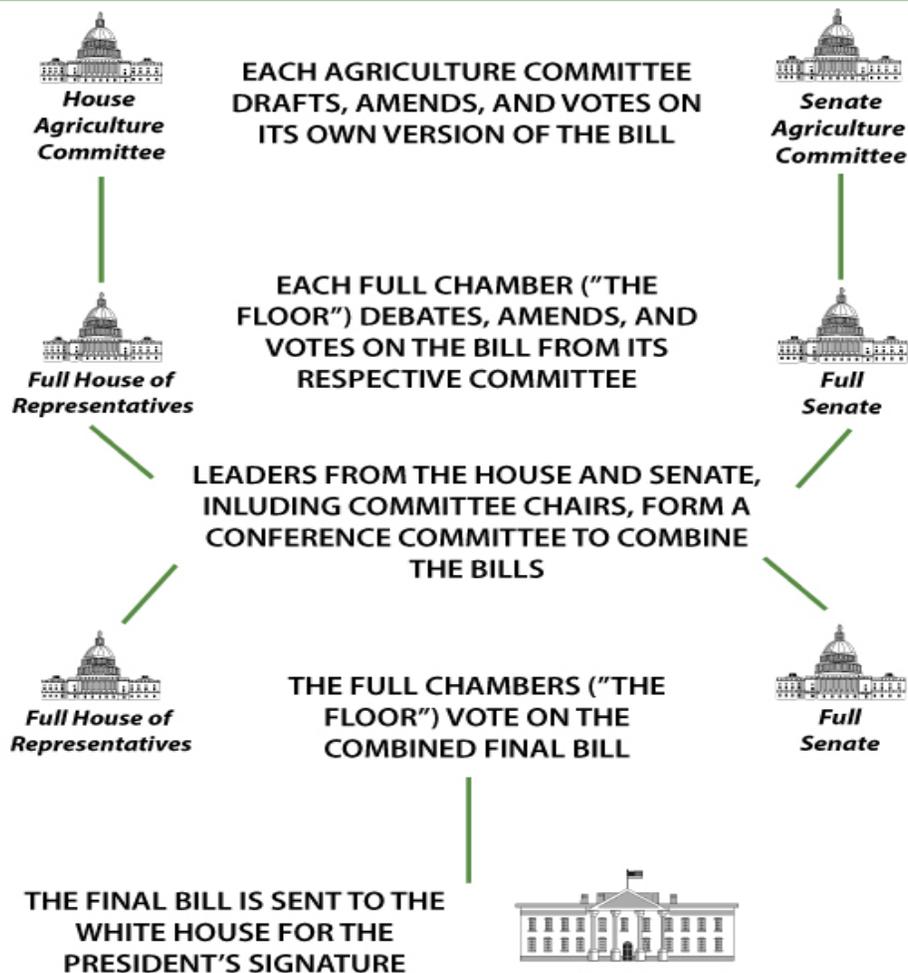


Sources: <https://www.judiciary.senate.gov/about/members> ; <https://www.sanders.senate.gov/about> ; <https://welch.house.gov/about>

² **Farm Bill Programs Without a Budget Baseline Beyond 2017**, J. Monke, <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/misc/R44758.pdf>

Figure 1. How a Bill Becomes a Law

The Path to a New Farm Bill



Source: National Sustainable Agriculture Coalition: <http://sustainableagriculture.net/our-work/campaigns/fbcampaign/what-is-the-farm-bill/>

The Farm Bill renewal process begins in communities, with individuals and interest groups sharing **feedback** to members of Congress regarding the impacts of policies and programs. Based on this input, members of the farm and food subgroup of each **chamber** of Congress are tasked with a specific area of focus, known as the House and Senate Agricultural **Committees**, and work to write short **marker bills** that reflect changes to programs. Some of these policies are included in a more comprehensive **draft** bill, which is written by the **Chair**, or leader, of each committee. In the committee, the draft bill is debated, proposed changes are shared through **amendments**, and is ultimately voted on before it is sent to the entire chamber, at which point this process to be repeated. Once a bill passes in each chamber, a **conference committee** made up of both House and Senate members works to negotiate differences between the two bills, and form a joint bill. This **combined** bill returns to each chamber to vote on without changes. Lastly, the bill that is accepted by both chambers is sent to the president to accept or **veto**, or reject, the final bill.

II. History of the Farm Bill

Two major events in the 20th century are largely responsible for the iterations of Farm Bills that exist today. The first was the Great Depression during the 1930s. During this time of economic slump, farmers were not immune to the hardship and faced challenges to bring in enough income from their crops. As a result, the United States government enacted supply management programs coupled with price supports to mitigate the national agricultural crisis³. The resulting legislation was called the Agricultural Adjustment Act of 1933, and included specific price points for commodity crops and livestock products. The emergency farm programs included in the 1933 act were based upon the predominant system of farming during the time—small scale, diversified farms. The US government purchased the commodities to support the struggling agricultural economy, and reserved excess crops for supply management⁴. However, this was judged as unconstitutional, and a revised bill was passed in 1936.

As the country bounced back from the Great Depression, the federal government developed an early food assistance program to distribute excess commodities at a discounted price to public assistance recipients⁵. Through this program, the first iteration of food stamps was employed in 1939. Recipients purchased orange food stamps for \$1, which could be exchanged for any food items. In addition to the orange stamps, recipients received a blue stamp that was valued at \$0.50; the blue stamps could be exchanged for excess commodities that were considered surplus goods by the federal government. The program ended in 1943 after national economic improvement.

The second event that led to further agricultural policy development was the Dust Bowl of the 1930s. Agricultural intensification, in addition to severe drought in the Great Plains contributed to the persistent dust clouds, which extended past the breadbasket of the U.S.⁶. The Soil Conservation and Domestic Allotment Act of 1936 was enacted in response to the Dust Bowl, with the purpose to safeguard soil resources⁷. This program incentivized the production of “soil-conserving crops” rather than soil depleting crops by offering federal payments to farmers.

Following the conclusion of World War II, new international markets provided the opportunity to send surplus commodities to developing countries. Through the Agricultural

³ **The 20th Century Transformation of U.S. Agriculture and Farm Policy**, C. Dimitri, A. Effland, and N. Conklin, https://www.ers.usda.gov/webdocs/publications/44197/13566_eib3_1_.pdf?v=41055

⁴ **A historical primer on the US farm bill: Supply management and conservation policy**, D. McGranahan, <http://www.jswnonline.org/content/68/3/67A.full.pdf+html>

⁵ **Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program: Examining the Evidence to Define Benefit Adequacy**, J. Caswell and A. Yaktine, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK206907/>

⁶ **More Than 80 Years Helping People Help the Land: A Brief History of NRCS**, USDA, https://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/detail/national/about/history/?cid=nrcs143_021392

⁷ **Milestones in U.S. Farming and Farm Policy**, USDA, <https://www.ers.usda.gov/amber-waves/2005/june/data-feature/>

Trade Development Assistance Act of 1954, excess crops were sent to emerging nations as a means of expanding international markets⁸. This program, often referred to as Food for Peace, also served to increase the exports of U.S. goods to developing countries while providing humanitarian relief⁹.

After a pilot trial from 1961 through 1964, the food stamp program was permanently signed into law under President Johnson in 1964¹⁰. This program offered nutrition assistance to low-income Americans. Blue and orange stamps were no longer used, and were replaced by coupons that were purchased by the aid recipients. In 1973, the food stamp program was first included in the Agriculture and Consumer Protection Act, making this the first omnibus farm bill¹¹. Previously known as the food stamp program or electronic benefit transfer (EBT), the program today is now called the Supplemental Nutrition Assistant Program, or SNAP, and functions similar to a debit card.

The recent reauthorizations of the Farm Bill have continued to expand to include policies and programs on various areas of food, agriculture, and beyond. Organic agriculture was first included in the 1990 omnibus legislation. Energy and biofuels were included in the Farm Bills between 2002 and 2014⁹. Though the Farm Bill continues to evolve, the main principles of supporting the growth of US agriculture and agricultural economies have guided national farm and food legislation.

⁸ **A historical primer on the US farm bill: Supply management and conservation policy**, D. McGranahan, <http://www.jswnonline.org/content/68/3/67A.full.pdf+html>

⁹ **Foreign Aid: An Introductory Overview of U.S. Programs and Policy**, C. Tarnoff <http://www.dtic.mil/docs/citations/ADA457380>

¹⁰ **A Short History of SNAP**, USDA, <https://www.fns.usda.gov/snap/short-history-snap>

¹¹ **What is the Farm Bill?** R. Johnson, <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/misc/RS22131.pdf>

III. Methods

3.1 Research Rationale

In a democratic society, public engagement in policy discussions is vital to ensure that policymakers create legislation that meets the needs of their constituents. Policy discussions can be defined as the expression and exchange of input, feedback, and perspectives of community members and their elected representatives in regards to government rulemaking. This can include, but is not limited to, the addition, removal, alteration, or maintenance of policies. While active citizen participation within all levels of government is crucial to a healthy political system and well-functioning democracy, sometimes citizens are unable or unwilling to voice their position directly. Often times, to address this occurrence, stakeholder groups and community organizations play the role of the interpreter to connect community members and the citizens' voices to policymakers.

Vermont has a strong history of community participation in policy discussions and political expression is highly valued within the state. Based on these characteristics, the state of Vermont offers a unique context for the study of public discussions about food system policies, such as the Farm Bill. In addition to having a unique, politically active community, Vermont is also well known for a thriving agricultural heritage. The goal of this guide is to help stakeholder organizations and individual citizens better understand the process of advocating for the needs of their communities and communicating input to policymakers. The results will represent and speak directly to Vermont food systems groups. It is likely that groups and citizens in other locations will also find the results valuable for facilitating full participation in policy discussions.

3.2 Research Methods

To understand the ways by which Vermont stakeholders participate in Farm Bill discussions, a thorough research process was carried out, including identification of organizations, interviews, and analyses of responses. Community-based organizations were identified through a search of food systems directories focused on sectors relating to select titles of the Farm Bill. Various stakeholders including organization representatives and congressional staff members were interviewed. Finally, the analysis process included the coding of responses to find major themes among interview responses.

Considering the comprehensive nature of the Farm Bill, four specific titles were selected based on Farm Bill priorities in Vermont (see Box 3). After identifying chief priorities of value to the Vermont food and agricultural system, the following four titles were chosen:

Box 3. Importance of Titles

Although this guide focuses on four titles (dairy as a commodity, conservation, nutrition, and rural development) on which to base the research and findings, it must be noted that all titles play an important role and have impacts across Vermont and U.S. food systems, based on the policies and programs implemented.

dairy as a commodity, conservation, nutrition, and rural development. Title I of the Farm Bill is dedicated to commodity crops, in which dairy is included. Dairy, within the commodity title, was selected because it is threaded into Vermont's rural heritage and agricultural economy, contributing to 70% of Vermont's agricultural sales, and taking up approximately 80% of the state's farmland¹².

As a state, Vermont greatly values environmental conservation and preservation, thus the conservation title was identified as an important area of focus¹³. This title authorizes programs and funding to support beneficial environmental practices within farming systems. With 11% of Vermonters experiencing food insecurity, nutrition was the third title chosen in order to explore advocacy surrounding a program that is vital to significant part of the state's population¹⁴. Finally, the rural development title was chosen based on the importance of supporting and advancing the opportunities and infrastructure of rural agricultural communities in Vermont.

The initial search for organizations was conducted using the Vermont Farm to Plate network directory. A second search on Google using the keywords Vermont + organization + Farm Bill title name rounded out the search to ensure the inclusion of any organizations that were not included in the network directory. To qualify as a member of the directory list of stakeholder groups, organizations had to be statewide groups that are community-based organizations (see Appendix 2). Constituent advocacy groups, stakeholder organizations, and interest groups were selected based on their involvement in at least one of these four title areas—dairy within the commodity title, nutrition, rural development, or conservation. Some organizations have involvement in two or more of these focus areas. It is important to note that some groups included in the directory do not advocate for federal Farm Bill policy, and some groups do not advocate at all. However, all organizations included in the directory are stakeholders of Farm Bill policy.

Twelve organizations were randomly selected for an interview, in addition to two congressional staff members. Fourteen total interviews were conducted using a semi-structured questioning format, consisting of five main questions regarding the Farm Bill policy development process (see Box 4). The questions focused on the organizations' representation base, the ways by which organizations gained policy input from community members, and how they translated feedback to policymakers. Each interview lasted between 30 and 45 minutes. The interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim.

¹² **New Study Highlights the Value of Vermont's Dairy Industry**, A. Kosakowski, http://agriculture.vermont.gov/pr/new_study_highlights_the_value_of_vermonts_dairy_industry

¹³ **A question of value: What do trees and forests mean to people in Vermont?** E. A. O'Brien, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/01426390600783335>

¹⁴ **Household Food Insecurity in the United States**, A. Coleman-Jensen, M. P. Rabbitt, C. A. Gregory, and A. Singh, <https://www.ers.usda.gov/publications/pub-details/?pubid=79760>

The interviews were coded using an analysis of reoccurring themes. Through thematic analysis, this process identified patterns and found themes that emerged from the interviews. The transcripts were read and re-read in order to confirm strong familiarity with the content. Themes were found within and across transcripts. The re-reading ceased when no new themes emerged from the data. The following sections will outline the strategies, challenges, barriers, and opportunities expressed by the interviewees based on the experiences and input shared by individuals and their organizations. Nameless quotes from interviews will be included to maintain anonymity while honoring voices and experiences from the Vermont community.

Box 4. Overview of Interview Questions:

1. What role does your organization play in Farm Bill discussions?
2. What community members or constituents does your organization represent when talking about Farm Bill issues?
3. How does your organization communicate with community members or constituents to gather their input on policy feedback or recommendations?
4. How do you effectively communicate the multiple opinions or unique needs of your constituents to policymakers?
5. What are the beneficial strategies to engage community members? What are the challenges and barriers?

IV. Findings

Given the variety of organization sizes, values, compositions, constituencies, and capacities, there was a range of strategies, challenges, barriers, and opportunities shared. Nevertheless, it was found that, despite the different interests and subsequent titles by which the stakeholder groups were classified, many of the same practices and experiences were shared across titles and organizations. For this purpose, the majority of results presented here are relevant across titles and organizations, with two specific differences worth noting:

- Various stakeholder groups classified as involved within the nutrition title participated in an independent, statewide advocacy group and worked together as the Vermont Farm Bill Nutrition Coalition. A Farm Bill group or coalition in Vermont of this structure does not exist for any other titles.
- Organizations predominantly focused on rural development were less likely than other titles to be involved in Farm Bill advocacy work, often because of potential conflicts of interest due to government funding streams.

4.1 Strategies

Community Relationships

One of the most important elements of Farm Bill advocacy interviewees said that are the relationships between stakeholders. These relationships exist between organizations, their members, the broader community, other organizations, state and federal agencies, and congressional representatives and their staff. Organizations and stakeholder groups play a valuable role in the advocacy process as they often have a defined membership base organized around a common interest or industry.

- **Organization-constituent relationship:** Stakeholder groups have the capability of educating and updating their constituency about the Farm Bill, gathering input on the successes or challenges of policies and programs, taking recommendations from members, and consolidating feedback to share with policymakers.
- **Organization-organization relationship:** There is often collaboration amongst separate stakeholder groups. These collaborations occur on different scales such as state or national collaborations. The formality of the partnerships also varies, ranging from casual conversations on the effectiveness of programs, to distinct coalitions (See page 17 for more about coalitions). These relationships also contribute support between and amongst stakeholder groups, considering that some groups may face barriers to advocating. A group that may not be able to self-advocate due to capacity or funding may have a partnership with another organization, which can then advocate on the other group's behalf. As policies and programs directly impact an organization, other groups that work in concert with the aforementioned group may be indirectly impacted. Thus a group may advocate on the other group's behalf.

- **Constituent/organization-Congress relationship:** All stakeholders interviewed echoed the importance of strong relationships with the congressional delegation and their staff members for effective Farm Bill advocacy. One organization expressed that their close work with the congressional delegation *“is a partnership that they need to be concert with. They are very much interested in understanding where we as Vermont want to be as it relates to the Farm Bill.”* Outreach staffers and field representatives of Congresspeople serve as the liaisons between Congresspeople and the community whom they represent. As a two-way medium of information, field representatives are crucial stakeholders to whom to communicate what is happening and what is needed within communities for federal advocacy (see Box 5). These individuals provide community members and organizations with updates and information on policy statuses. Congressional field representatives are often present at various stakeholder meetings.

Box 5. Contacting Congress

Individuals and stakeholder groups have the power to directly contact the Vermont congressional offices, and members of their staff (see page 20 for tips on contacting Congress or Appendix 3 for contact info).

Case Study: Vermont Farm Bill Nutrition Coalition

The Vermont Farm Bill Nutrition Coalition is a group of **14 organizations** advocating for the support of nutrition assistance programs authorized through the Farm Bill. Organized and convened by Hunger Free Vermont, this alliance includes **partners** from anti-hunger and food security organizations, agricultural stakeholder groups, public service providers, and state agencies. During each new Farm Bill cycle, the group convenes and **meets multiple times** during the **policy development process** to discuss Vermont nutrition program priorities based on the **different communities** they work with and **represent**. Ideas are shared based on what the various stakeholder groups are seeing **on the ground**. Once all ideas are on the table, the group **narrows** down their priorities to a set of **recommendations** for the Vermont congressional delegation. The recommendations are **clear, straightforward points** that are **unanimously** agreed upon by all coalition members. Finally, the list of recommendations is shared with the community to **sign on** to show their support for Vermont’s nutrition assistance priorities for the upcoming Farm Bill. This is also shared with the **congressional delegation**, in addition to written **technical language** for inclusion in actual legislation.

Tips for Forming a Coalition:

1. Identify individuals or organizations with an overlap of goals
2. Decide with whom to work, including stakeholders and potential opposition
3. Understand the timeline for influencing policy, and plan early enough ahead
4. Create a schedule or plan by working backwards from the above timeline
5. Decide on key priorities which are unanimously agreed upon by the group
6. Draft language as a group for changes or maintenance of policies or programs
7. Share group input with congressional delegation or partners, and vice versa

Level of Involvement

The level of Farm Bill advocacy involvement greatly depended on time and funding for most organizations. Some stakeholder groups indicated that they don't advocate or participate in Farm Bill discussions at all. According to one group's representative, they believed that federal advocacy is too expensive for their organization to participate in based on the cost of lobbying in Washington, D.C. Additionally, a group that focuses only on state advocacy shared that the process of advocating in D.C. is too difficult for the scope and capacity of their organization. The scope of involvement of stakeholder groups varied from state, regional, and national level advocacy. Some groups focused on keeping their advocacy efforts contained within Vermont, while others had national partnerships and coalitions of which they were a part.

- **National partnerships:** *“I think these national partners who we work with are key because they allow us to bring the Vermont voice into the national conversation in a way that I don't have the capacity, or our organization as a small staff, but if we can get that insight from folks that are on the ground and working on it everyday, then that brings out capacity in and of itself to be involved.”* This organization participates in a nationwide coalition, and helps to translate what is happening in Vermont in their interest area to a national conversation.
- **State level partnerships:** By administering programs at the state level and advocating to congressional field representatives in Vermont, one organization shared that *“at the statewide level [we can] see the broad scope of the work we do”* in order to *“get a picture of where the need is and how peoples' needs are being met.”* As a statewide organization, this group explained that they see the big picture of how issues play out across the state, and can provide a comprehensive overview of the impacts of programs and policies in their interest area in Vermont.

Roles in Advocacy

Advocacy comes in different forms, and the ways that organizations choose to participate in Farm Bill conversations varies by the stakeholder group. As previously mentioned, some groups do not get involved in federal policy, or specifically the Farm Bill. This section will include some practices shared by groups who participate in Farm Bill conversations.

- **Political neutrality:** *“We'll never get involved politically, but we will bring voice to the issues we see and programs administered.”* Some organizations choose to remain apolitical, but will offer a comment on the effectiveness of a program or how a change may impact their organization or the community.
- **Connecting constituents:** *“We don't try to recruit feedback. [We] are not the farmer. So its always better if it comes from them.”* Some organizations act as a connector between community members or their constituents, and the congressional delegation and their staff. However, these organizations will not speak on behalf of their constituents.

- **Stakeholder convener:** *“We are frequently the convener to make sure that the people administering programs or people creating legislation know what’s happening on the ground.”* Organizations may serve as a liaison between other stakeholder groups and government representatives.

Gathering Community Input

When stakeholder groups do advocate for specific topics or on behalf of community members and constituents, there are many methods employed in Vermont to collect input for Farm Bill policy. This can be direct and intentional by asking constituents for feedback, or less deliberate such as seeing how policies are occurring and impacting communities, and making recommendations based upon program effectiveness.

- **Boots on the ground:** One of the most commonly shared practices was the work of seeing how policies and programs are playing out on the ground. This was most common in organizations that administer programs, provide technical assistance, or offer support to individuals accessing federal services.
- **Community data:** The use of *“data from real life experiences”* within the field can provide insightful information, which can be translated to policy feedback and recommendations to congressional representatives.
- **Surveys:** Some organizations mentioned that they collect input from community members on policy needs through written or online surveys. These surveys could be directly focused on policy, or could subtly contribute to policy recommendations by asking about experiences and challenges faced by community organizations.
- **Meetings:** Regular membership meetings can provide a forum both to educate citizens on policy, in addition to gathering feedback from individuals relating to policy and programmatic needs.

Communication Practices

There was a range of practices shared by interviewees as to how stakeholder groups and congressional offices keep community members engaged and informed. Additionally, stakeholder groups expressed the methods they utilize to share community input and feedback to congressional offices. See box 6 for tips on communicating with congressional representatives and their staff.

- **Personal stories:** Stakeholder organizations that speak on behalf of their constituents reported that they greatly value integrating personal stories and voices of their members into the feedback provided to Congress. One organization suggested that they *“bring stories to the table and show how these policies affect real people.”*
- **Clear language:** There is great value in making information accessible to the widest population possible. When creating Farm Bill advocacy materials for the general community, organizations may implement *“public friendly and easy to understand”* language that is clear and gets right to the point.

- **Policy recommendations:** Stakeholder groups shared that it is beneficial to share their Farm Bill input with Congress in terms of priorities or policy recommendations. This can vary from clear points to suggested technical, legal language for direct inclusion in legislation.
- **Congressional presence:** Many organizations invite congressional representatives and staffers to community meetings in order to have direct federal participation and interaction when sharing policy needs and input.
- **Capitol visits:** While in Washington, D.C., some stakeholder groups stated that they visit the offices of Vermont congressional delegates in order to lobby directly to representatives.

Box 6. Tips for communicating with Congress

1. Do homework. Gather background information on the topic or issue.
2. Be polite and respectful.
3. If meeting in person, be prepared to potentially meet with more than one person.
4. Have a plan for the “pitch”; be content rich, but measured.
5. Clearly state the main point, whether in a meeting, over the phone, or written in an e-mail or letter.
6. Consider that Congress is busy and has limited time—keep it straightforward.
7. State credibility. If sharing an opinion or experiences on a topic, share why it is relevant or important.
8. Use concise examples to support the perspective.
9. Be ready to suggest policy recommendations or suggest an alternative to a policy or program.
10. Follow up with a thank you note for the individual’s time. Stay updated on the progress of the ask and show appreciation if the Member pursues the request.

4.2 Challenges

The common adage, “if it was easy, everyone would do it” certainly applies to political advocacy, and the Farm Bill is not excluded from this concept. Many challenges that complicate the process of advocating and sharing feedback were expressed in the interviews.

Farm Bill Timing

Like Vermont weather, the Farm Bill timeline can often be unpredictable. Historically, stakeholder groups and community members have had little influence over the timing of the Farm Bill drafting and authorization process. Thus, it can be challenging to jump into the development and community input conversations when the national process is beyond that point. However, staying abreast of the status of the process can help to mitigate this. Relationships with congressional staffers or involved organizations can help to navigate this through updates. Furthermore, depending on other legislation taking place in Congress, the Farm Bill timeline could be affected and put on the backburner, or suddenly become a

number one priority with little warning. This can present a challenge to organizations to coordinate the timing of their recommendations.

Education and Awareness

Education and awareness can also pose a challenge for both organizations and community members. The complexity of the Farm Bill is challenging on its own; the diversity of titles and components within can lead to difficulty when attempting to understand how the legislation impacts individuals, and which component(s) is/are most crucial.

- **Identifying political literacy:** When stakeholder groups are tasked with connecting their constituents directly with congressional representatives and staffers to give input, interviewees shared that it can be challenging to identify and select community members who have a level of political literacy to express their needs to Congress effectively. For example, one organization shared that “*it can be tricky to identify individuals who are able to speak to their own experience but articulate it in the context of federal policy.*” A downside of this approach is that this can limit or exclude the voices of individuals based on their level of education or policy awareness.
- **Selecting participants:** A stakeholder shared that their organization greatly values having the greatest amount of voices at the table, but it can be challenging to ensure that each of the voices is informed to an extent that they are able to share coordinated input.
- **Contacting representatives:** All community members have the capability to contact their representatives’ offices directly; this is associated with challenges, because not all individuals are aware of this ability.

Representation

Many organizations reported challenges associated with representing individuals in addition to their ideas when advocating on their behalf.

- **Meeting size:** When organizing community Farm Bill meetings, stakeholder groups have the power but also the challenge of selecting who will be at the table and participate in the conversation. Meeting size and scale is important to some organizations in order to have a “*manageable group for conversations.*” Figuring out who is present and who will be represented in the discussion can inhibit the presence of certain voices or populations.
- **Narrowing priorities:** When collaborating and formulating priorities or recommendations, a stakeholder group or coalition may need to narrow down a large number of points that were shared within the conversation. The process of funneling may exclude certain topics that may be a priority for some organizations but not as much for others.

Federal Advocacy Process

The structure and reality of federal policy can also pose a challenge that is faced by individuals and organizations. Despite their continued involvement, some stakeholder groups shared their discouragement surrounding federal advocacy.

- **Farm Bill complexity:** Considering the complexity and unpredictability of the Farm Bill, groups expressed difficulty when trying to understand where to begin advocating and what aspects that can be influenced.
- **Federal-scale advocacy:** Vermont is one state in a nation of fifty, in addition to being one of the smallest states. At the state level, one stakeholder reported that they are able to *“have conversations, and you can see the benefits on the ground... its just a much more direct experience compared to the national process. I don't know that we're going to influence any change.”* Some organizations expressed discouragement given the difference between state advocacy and federal advocacy.

4.3 Barriers

Barriers inhibit community members and stakeholder groups from engaging in the Farm Bill advocacy process in any form.

Capacity of Time and Money

The constraint of time for busy individuals and organizations can inhibit one's ability to participate in Farm Bill conversations and advocacy. While advocacy work does not have to be time consuming, having the capacity to understand the Farm Bill and finding the means to advocate can be time intensive.

- **Time restrictions:** *“People are so busy. People are often under-resourced and over stressed with their services.”* The main role of many organizations is not always focused on advocacy, thus for some organizations it is difficult to find the capacity to participate in Farm Bill advocacy.
- **Financial constraints:** *“The budget piece is always a barrier...not knowing where the money is going to come from.”* Some methods of advocacy such as hiring a lobbyist or traveling can be very expensive and inhibit groups from advocating using these practices.

Funding Source

Some groups advertently will not or cannot advocate for federal policy due to potential conflicts of interest. This is often due to funding streams that comes from the U.S. government, or specifically from programs that are authorized by the Farm Bill.

- **Advocacy conflicts:** Some organizations are *“a little bit tied as far as being quasi-state led entities as far as public funding. That's the other side of the piece; a lot of the reason we don't advocate is because a lot of the funding that we get prevents us from advocating for what we want from politicians.”*

Marginalized communities

Underrepresented populations include women, people of color, youth, low-income individuals, and immigrants. These populations are particularly marginalized and not often in positions of power in food and agricultural decision-making. This is true in Vermont.

- **Low-income populations:** *“One group that doesn’t participate often is low-income people...there’s a deep strata of people in Vermont who are discouraged, and feel disconnected and are not seeing progress in their own circumstances.”*
- **Limited education:** *“Part of the challenge in Vermont and in rural communities is that people who have the greatest need may have the least education and the most limited ability to have powerful advocacy for themselves.”*

Infrastructure

Despite the further development of policies addressing infrastructure issues like broadband, individuals in Vermont and nationally still experience difficulty in accessing the Internet. Although the Internet is an available resource for many populations, relying on online communication to share Farm Bill events and updates is not the most accessible route for all stakeholders involved.

4.4 Opportunities

Many individuals expressed optimism regarding an increase in Farm Bill advocacy and stakeholder involvement across the state.

Engaging Young People

The policy decisions of today will impact current communities in addition to future communities and generations. Many organizations echoed the importance of including youth in the Farm Bill conversation. As one stakeholder stated, *“Young people are the future.”* While some organizations make an effort to engage younger generations, there is great opportunity to expand the Farm Bill conversation in Vermont to include youths.

Educating and Empowering

Community members must understand the impacts that the Farm Bill has on them in order to want to get involved. Individuals and stakeholder groups have the opportunity to share their Farm Bill knowledge with fellow community members and help others understand the importance of this sweeping federal legislation. In addition to teaching others about the importance the Farm Bill, stakeholders need to understand how they can help to influence federal policy.

- **Community ownership:** *“It’s great for folks to take ownership of what’s happening in their communities.”*

- **Identifying values:** A powerful opportunity is to “*make people feel empowered to get involved for their own reasons and want to understand [the Farm Bill] and that it is important to them.*”

Vermont Farm Bill Coalition

Various stakeholder groups expressed their interest in collaborating with other organizations around Vermont Farm Bill policy priorities and recommendations. Through an independently organized, holistic coalition of cross sector stakeholder groups, this collaboration could remove politics from the discussion to an extent and lead to a more comprehensive, unified set of grassroots Vermont priorities.

- **Community coordination:** “*I think that could be really exciting and there could be more momentum around it, but it has to be very well coordinated and there has to be more people at the table than there are now to potentially push something like that.*”

Leadership

Leaders in their field are often sought out directly to provide advice and policy suggestions to congressional representatives. There are many ways to be a leader. See box 7 for different forms of leadership.

- **Respect and representation:** “*You become a leader for a reason, and its because people respect you and appreciate your ability to represent them and speak for them.*”

Box 7. Examples of leaders in their field

- A producer who leads in implementing conservation practices
- A farmer who has some of the best dairy production in the state
- A leader of an organization
- Someone who aggregates voices in their community
- A scholar in a certain discipline(s) with deep understand of their topic area(s)
- A community organizer who empowers others

4.5 Representation Strategies

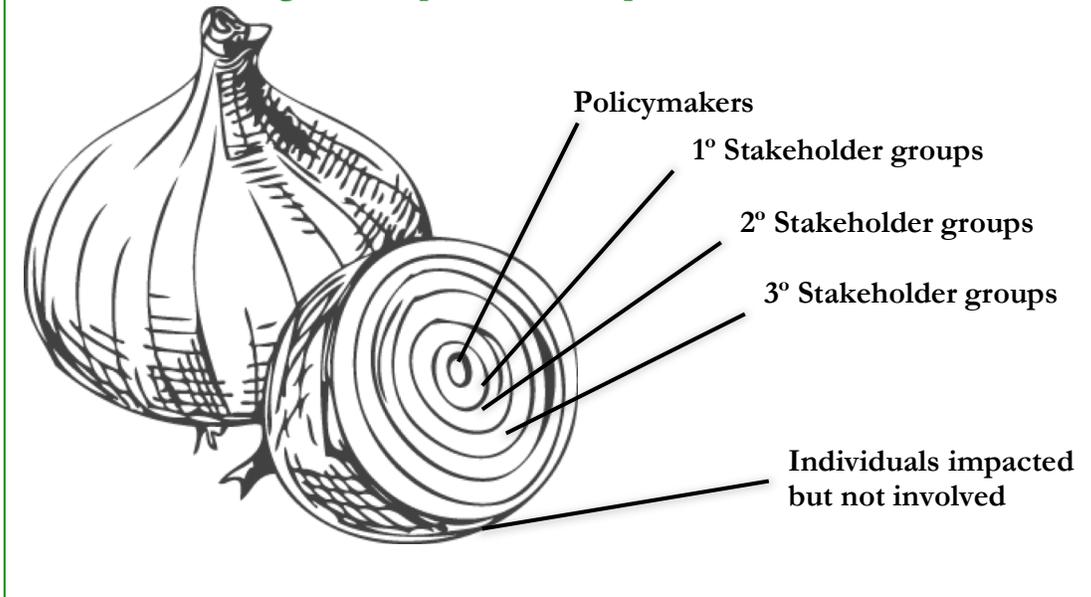
Stakeholder groups reported taking on different roles in terms of how they leveraged the voices of their constituents to policymakers, thus bridging the gap between individuals and government representatives. This is subsequently referred to as degrees of representation and separation (RAS). Representation refers to how organizations are serving as a translating voice for individuals in their constituent base. Separation refers to median forces between a community member and their elected policy representatives.

- **One degree of RAS** from community members to policymakers: a one-degree organization serves the purpose of directly connecting constituents with policymakers. For example, this type of organization will be connected or reach out to a policymakers office in order to support direct connections or engagement between representatives and community members.
- **Two degrees of RAS:** organizations that gather input from community members to better understand the impact of federal policies and programs on constituents. This was most common in the interviews. These stakeholder groups are able to see how these programs are affecting community members, such as the impacts of the supplemental nutrition program (SNAP) or how farmers are navigating the environmental subsidies offered by programs such as the environmental quality incentives program (EQIP). In these situations, organizations gather input and speak to policy representatives on behalf of communities, or leverage the needs of community members through the voice of the organization.
- **Three degrees of RAS:** stakeholder groups reported that their role in Farm Bill policy development conversations was as a median group to leverage other organizations' feedback to policymakers. For example, this type of organization will gather various community organizations on a certain topic, and help facilitate a discussion to highlight priorities and policy needs. They will then streamline and translate this feedback to policymakers. Third degree organizations accumulate feedback and input from other stakeholder groups of various sizes of representation bases.

Based upon interviewee feedback about their experiences and different levels of advocacy in Farm Bill discussions, the following model depicts the various degrees of representation and separation. An onion is representative of the policy engagement and communication process because it signifies the “layers” between community voices and policymakers (see Box 8). Given that legislators are the actors directly involved in representation and policymaking, they are situated as the core of the onion. From this level, the subsequent degrees of separation and representation are depicted as successive layers of the onion.

The diagram represents how community organizations leverage voices of constituents and community members whom they represent. Variability occurred across Farm Bill title areas due to size, organizational values and preferences, funding, and experience. Each degree was found to have strengths and challenges, though it is unknown which strengths are more beneficial, and which challenges are more difficult than those faced by other tiers.

Box 8. Model of degrees of separation and representation



Adapted from <https://www.thechodosgroup.com/health-counseling-for-wellness/>

It is also necessary to depict the community members who are impacted by Farm Bill policy but not involved in the conversation. This phenomenon can be represented as the skin of the onion. This peripheral position includes those who may want to be involved in advocacy but for various reasons are not able to participate, those who are aware but choose not to advocate, and those who do not know what the Farm Bill is or the impacts.

V. Synthesis

The strategies presented in this guide are based on the input of various stakeholder groups across Vermont. Practices that work for some may not be the most fitting for others. The following recommendations are a synthesis of the strategies recommended in interviews.

5.1 Recommendations for Advocacy

Keep in mind that there is no “right” way to advocate; the following strategies might be adopted when first getting involved in Farm Bill advocacy policy.

Building a Foundation

- Learn and understand what the Farm Bill is and what is included in it.
- Identify the resources and capacity of the individual or organization (including time and money).
- List priorities, motives, and goals of advocating.

Forming Relationships

- Identify individuals or organizations with similar missions or goals—there is strength in numbers.
- Join an advocacy organization, or recommend that one’s organization begins or increases their advocacy efforts. This can be a major opportunity for leadership.
- Individuals or organizations can help to educate others on the Farm Bill and its impacts on communities and Vermont. This practice can also be used to recruit.

Taking Action

- Know the facts and stay up to date on agricultural policy happenings.
 - Politico’s Morning Agriculture blog sends daily updates on federal agriculture policy activities: <https://www.politico.com/morningagriculture/>
- Host or attend meetings.
- Learn about and track the priority areas and political actions of Vermont congressional representatives.
- Understand who the opposition may be, and what they are saying.
- Draft straightforward priorities and recommendations to share with community members and representatives.

Communicating

- Share feedback with Congressional representatives—see page 20 for tips.
- Schedule a meeting or invite the representative or their staff to a community meeting to directly share input
- Represent partners or organizations that face barriers to advocating.

Staying Engaged

- Keeping track of the progress of bills through news, bill tracking websites, or updates from organizations.
- Follow up with congressional representatives and their staff. Offer thanks.

5.2 Conclusion

The Farm Bill is an important statute that impacts virtually all Vermonters and stakeholder organizations in some way. Understanding the scope of the comprehensive food, agricultural, and environmental legislation is vital to consider how the Farm Bill affects each citizen, though it may vary by individual. With a thorough grasp on the Farm Bill's nature, one can find the areas that they most value and feel strong about to advocate for the preservation or change of specific policies and programs.

Individual advocacy is powerful in that citizens can contact the offices of Vermont representatives, and often can be connected directly with the Farm Bill focused staff member. Personal stories and sharing the ways that programs are impacting individuals often can be influential when communicating a policy position.

Additionally, there is strength in numbers. By finding and collaborating with other individuals or organizations throughout Vermont, a strong voice can greatly leverage input for Farm Bill policy on the federal playing field. While there have been different collaborative bodies ranging in size and scope, Farm Bill organizing in Vermont has generally been confined to a sector or specific title or program within the Farm Bill. Perhaps the most considerable opportunity to emerge from this research for the state of Vermont is an independently organized, holistic coalition of organizations representing multiple food, agricultural, and environmental sectors and various titles of the Farm Bill.

Advocacy can take many forms and is carried out in various ways. Individuals and organizations are encouraged to explore different avenues that best fit their scope and capacity. Throughout each strategy of voicing feedback for Farm Bill policies, it is valuable to be informed on Farm Bill basics, maintain respectful partnerships and collaborate with fellow community members, employ straightforward communication, and engage with the congressional delegation and their staff.

The Farm Bill legislation authorized in Washington, D.C. has direct impacts in Vermont. Despite being one of the smallest and least populated states in the nation, Vermonters in particular have a lot more opportunity than one might think to impact federal policy, and specifically the Farm Bill. With respected, powerful congressional representatives vocalizing Vermonters' Farm Bill needs in Washington, D.C., the state is a force to be reckoned with. It all starts locally, with citizens providing input and feedback in Vermont town halls and community meetings. In the words of one stakeholder, *“scale does something really wonderful for local action and decision making.”*

VI. Appendices

Appendix 1. Glossary of Terms

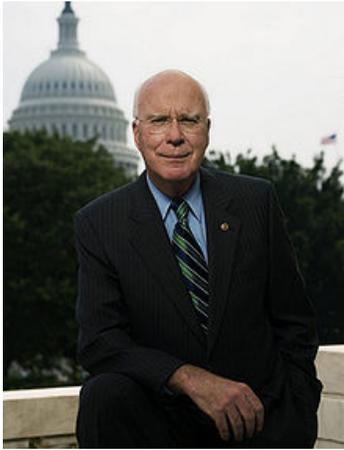
- **Amendment:** (n) an addition to a bill to add to, update, or remove a policy.
- **Appropriation:** (n) the specific allocation of funding toward certain policies or program.
- **Baseline:** (n) a predetermined minimum amount of spending at which mandatory programs must be operated.
- **Chair:** (n) the leader of a committee group of Congress.
- **Chamber:** the two subgroups of the United States Congress, which are divided into the lower division, the House of Representatives, and the upper division, the Senate.
- **Committee:** (n) a subgroup of Congress that is assigned to focus on specific topics.
- **Conference committee:** (n) a group of representatives from both chambers that jointly work to negotiate differences in separate bills focused on the same topic.
- **Delegation:** (n) the Congressional representatives from a state from both chambers.
- **Discretionary:** (adj) refers to spending towards policies and programs that the federal government can vary in their allocations, and are not obligated to fund.
- **Draft bill:** (n) an initial bill proposed for the consideration of Congress.
- **Farm Bill:** (n) a comprehensive set of U.S. laws and programs that focus on a wide range of topics relating to food, agriculture, the environment, and more.
- **Feedback:** (n) input and opinions regarding specific policies or programs.
- **House of Representatives:** (n) the lower subgroup of Congress that contains representatives from each state based on a state's population, with 435 total representatives. Each state has at least one representative within the House, who are reelected every two years. It is often referred to simply as the House.
- **Mandatory:** (adj) refers to spending towards policies and programs that the federal government is required to fund at a predetermined minimum.
- **Marker bill:** (n) a short bill that reflects policy changes suggested by members of Congress.
- **Omnibus:** (adj) refers to a bill that contains a broad array of somewhat unrelated topics.
- **Reauthorize:** (v) to renew a particular bill.
- **Senate:** the upper subgroup of Congress that includes 100 members, with 2 representatives from each state. Senators are reelected every six years.
- **Title:** (n) a category of a bill under which a specific subject is addressed.
- **Veto:** (v) to vote to reject a bill.

Appendix 2. Directory of Organizations

Organization	Location (VT unless otherwise noted)	Phone	General Email	Website	Dairy	Rural Development	Conservation	Nutrition
Agri-mark Inc.	Middlebury	802-388-6731		https://www.agrimark.coop/	X			
Audubon Vermont	Huntington	802-434-3068	vermont@audubon.org	http://vt.audubon.org			X	
Building a Local Economy (BALE) Center for an Agricultural Economy	South Royalton Hardwick	802-498-8438 802-472-5362		https://balevt.org https://hardwickagriculture.org http://www.champlainvalleyfarmercoalition.com/home.html		X		
Champlain Valley Farmer Coalition	Middlebury	802-388-4969	info@champlainvalleyfarmercoalition.com	http://www.champlainvalleyfarmercoalition.com/home.html		X	X	
Champlain Valley Office of Economic Opportunity	Burlington	802-862-2771		https://www.cvceo.org		X		X
Composting Association of Vermont	Westfield	802-744-2345	info@compostingvermont.org	www.compostingvermont.org			X	
Connecticut River Watershed Farmers Alliance				https://www.crwfa.org	X		X	
Friends of Northern Lake Champlain	Swanton		directorfnlc@gmail.com	http://www.northernlakechamplain.org			X	
Green Mountain Dairy Farmers Cooperative Federation					X			
Green Mountain Farm to School	Newport	802-334-2044	programs@gmfts.org	www.greenmountainfarmtoschool.org				X
Helping Overcome Poverty's Effects (HOPE) VT	Middlebury	802-388-3608		http://www.hope-vt.org		X		X
Hunger Free Vermont	South Burlington	802-865-0255	info@hungerfreevt.org	www.hungerfreevt.org				X
Intervale Center	Burlington	802-660-0440		https://www.intervale.org https://www.lakechamplaincommittee.org/		X	X	X
Lake Champlain Committee	Burlington	802-658-1414	lcc@lakechamplaincommittee.org	https://www.lclt.org			X	
Lake Champlain Land Trust	Burlington	802-862-4150	info@lclt.org	https://www.lclt.org			X	
Migrant Justice	Burlington	802-540-8370	info@migrantjustice.net	https://migrantjustice.net/ https://www.nature.org/ourinitiatives/regions/northamerica/unitedstates/vermont/index.htm	X	X		
Nature Conservancy, Vermont Chapter	Montpelier, Poultney	802-229-4425	vermont@tnc.org	http://www.newenglanddairyCouncil.org			X	
New England Dairy & Food Council	Boston, MA	617-734-6750		http://www.newenglanddairyCouncil.org	X			X
Northeast Organic Farming Association of Vermont (NOFA-VT)	Richmond	802-434-3821	info@nofavt.org	http://nofavt.org	X	X	X	X
Northeastern Vermont Development Association	St. Johnsbury	802-748-5181	info@nvda.net	http://nvda.net		X		
Organic Valley Cooperative	LaFarge, WI	888-444-6455	organic@organicvalley.coop	https://www.organicvalley.coop	X		X	
Preservation Trust of Vermont	Burlington	802-658-6647	ptv@ptvermont.org	http://ptvermont.org		X		
Regeneration Vermont	East Thetford	802-595-0060	regenerationvermont@gmail.com	http://regenerationvermont.org	X		X	
Rural Vermont	Montpelier	802-223-7222		www.ruralvt.org	X	X	X	
St. Albans Cooperative	St. Albans	802-524-6581		http://www.stalbanscooperative.com/	X	X	X	X
University of Vermont Extension	Burlington	802-656-2990		https://www.uvm.edu/extension/	X	X	X	X
Vermont Association of Conservation Districts	Waitsfield	802-496-5162		https://www.vacd.org/			X	
Vermont Business for Social Responsibility	Burlington	802-862-8347	info@vbstr.org	http://vbstr.org		X		
Vermont Community Foundation	Middlebury	802-388-3355	info@vermontcf.org	http://vermontcf.org		X	X	
Vermont Community Garden Network	Burlington	802-861-4769		https://vcgn.org		X		X
Vermont Council on Rural Development	Montpelier	802-223-6091	info@vtrural.org	http://www.vtrural.org/home		X	X	
Vermont Dairy Herd Improvement Association	White River Junction	800-639-8067	webmaster@vtdhia.org	http://www.vtdhia.org	X			
Vermont Dairy Producer's Association		802-624-0792	vermontdairyproducers@gmail.com	https://vermontdairyproducers.com/	X			
Vermont Farm Bureau	Richmond	802-434-5646	vtfb@vtfb.org	http://vtfb.org	x	X	X	
Vermont Feed Dealers & Manufacturers Association	Enosburg Falls		Contact form on website homepage	https://www.vtfeed.com	X			
Vermont Food Education Every Day (VT FEED)	Shelburne	802-985-0318	info@vtfeed.org	https://vtfeed.org/				X
Vermont Foodbank	Barre	800-585-2265	info@vtfoodbank.org	https://www.vtfoodbank.org				X
Vermont Grass Farmers	Randolph Center	802-656-0858		https://www.vtgrassfarmers.org	X		X	
Vermont Housing and Conservation Board	Montpelier	802-828-3250	info@vhcb.org	http://vhcb.org		X	X	
Vermont Land Trust	Montpelier	802-223-5234	info@vlt.org	http://vlt.org	X	X	X	
Vermont League of Cities and Towns	Montpelier	802-229-9111	info@vlct.org	http://vlct.org		X		
Vermont Natural Resources Council	Montpelier	802-223-2328		http://vnrc.org			X	
Vermont River Conservancy	Montpelier	802-229-0820	vrc@vermontriverconservancy.org	http://vermontriverconservancy.org			X	
Vermont Sustainable Jobs Fund	Montpelier	802-828-1260	info@vsjf.org	http://vsjf.org		X		
Vermont Young Farmers Coalition	Burlington		vyoungfarmers@gmail.com	http://www.youngfarmers.org/vermont-young-farmers-coalition/		X		
Vital Communities	White River Junction	802-291-9100	info@vitalcommunities.org	http://vitalcommunities.org		X		

Appendix 3. Directory of Vermont Congressional Representatives

Senator Patrick Leahy (D)



First Elected: 1974 **Next Election:** 2022
Committees: Agriculture, Nutrition, & Forestry – Appropriations – Judiciary – Rules and Administration
Website: leahy.senate.gov
Offices:
199 Main Street 87 State Street, Rm 338 437 Russell Building
Burlington, VT Montpelier, VT Washington, D.C.
802-863-2525 802-229-0569 202-224-4242

Chief of Staff: J.P. Dowd **State Director:** John Tracy
Agriculture & Environment Field Representative: Tom Berry
D.C. Agriculture & Environment Advisor: Adrienne Wojciechowski

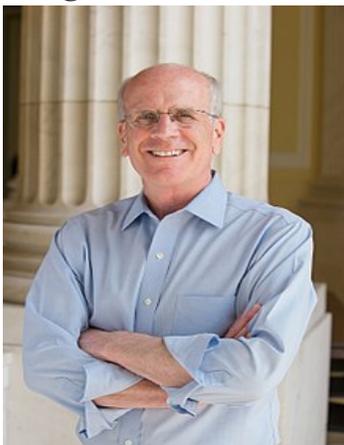
Senator Bernie Sanders (I)



First Elected: 2006 **Next Election:** 2018
Committees: Budget – Energy & Natural Resources – Environment & Public Works – Health, Education, Labor, & Pensions – Veteran Affairs
Website: sanders.senate.gov
Offices:
1 Church Street 357 Western Ave 322 Dirksen Building
Burlington, VT St. Johnsbury, VT Washington, D.C.
802-862-0697 800-339-9834 202-224-5141

Chief of Staff: Michaelleen Crowell **State Director:** David Weinstein
Agriculture & Environment Field Representative: Erica Campbell
D.C. Agriculture Advisor: Caryn Compton
D.C. Environment Advisor: Katie Thomas

Congressman Peter Welch (D)



First Elected: 2006 **Next Election:** 2018
Committees: Energy & Commerce – Oversight & Government Reform
Website: welch.house.gov
Offices:
128 Lakeside Avenue, Suite 235 2303 Rayburn Building
Burlington, VT Washington, D.C.
802-652-2450 202-224-4115

Chief of Staff: Robert Rogan **State Director:** George Twigg
Agriculture & Environment Field Representative: Ryan McLaren
D.C. Agriculture & Environment Advisor: Mark Fowler

Inspired by The Original U.S. Congress Handbook – <https://www.uscongresshandbook.com>