

Request for Proposals (RfP)

Development of Pro-Active Farm Plans for Wetland and Natural Resource Protection

Vermont Agency of Natural Resources – Center for Clean & Clear

Summary: Many Vermont dairy farmers would like to increase the number of productive acres in their farm operation in order to meet their feed needs. New areas being considered for production often include lands with natural values associated with wildlife and water quality, and may include wetlands. Furthermore, clearing land or changing land status is often subject to the jurisdiction of one or more state or federal agencies; farmers have expressed concern that the regulatory processes can be difficult and time-consuming to navigate. To address the needs and concerns of the farming community, while still protecting natural resources under state and federal jurisdiction, the agencies and representative farmers have responded by developing a pilot project to create pro-active farm plans for wetland and natural resource protection.

As part of this pilot project the Agency of Natural Resources (ANR) would like to identify agricultural producers interested in working cooperatively with agency representatives, and utilizing the services of a consultant to develop a comprehensive, long-range farm plan. ANR anticipates selecting between two and four farms to participate in the pilot project, and will cover the costs for contracting with a consultant to develop a farm plan that identifies:

1. Areas where there is a potential to increase crop production, that also require a land status change in order to make the physical improvements (“improved acres”).
2. Other existing or potential areas where natural values can be restored and/or enhanced in such a way that mitigates the impact of the proposed change in land status.
3. Alternative conservation practices that can be utilized on or within the field where the improved acres are located in order to help reduce the environmental impacts associated with the changes (e.g. vegetative buffers, cover cropping, reduced tillage methods).

The product of this effort will be a long-range farm plan which supports increases in cropland acreage through the minimization, protection and mitigation of natural values. In selecting participants for the pilot project, priority will be given to 1) farmland located within agriculturally impaired watersheds and 2) farm operations with opportunities for on-site mitigation. Once a farm plan is approved by the partnering agencies, a farm may receive a long-term permit (anticipated life of five to ten years) to implement the plan. Plan implementation will be the sole responsibility of the landowner, but certain plan elements may be eligible for state or federal cost-share.

Background: Dairy farms in Vermont are dynamic enterprises that change over time in order to remain economically viable. Farm operations change in response to the demand and prices associated with their products; they also change in response to the prices of other farm needs such as feed and fertilizer. These types of pressures have led many Vermont dairy farmers to

increase the amount of land in crop production, particularly for corn silage. New cropland acres are typically on land the producer already owns and/or operates, but are often in a more natural condition (forested or idle pasture).

The conversion of woodland or pasture to crop production can impact natural values associated with these less intensively managed lands. These values include water quality protection and soil erosion prevention, wildlife habitat, and cultural resources, among others. Areas being considered for conversion to crop production can also frequently include wetlands, as defined by federal and state regulatory programs. As a result, the conversion of these lands may require permits from government agencies, including the Army Corps of Engineers and the Vermont Department of Environmental Conservation. If Highly Erodible Land (HEL) or wetlands are involved in land conversion plans, then the farmer must also comply with the requirements under USDA's HEL and Wetland Compliance Provisions as required by the U.S. Farm Bill if they wish to remain eligible for USDA programs.

Vermont farmers contemplating the land conversion for crop production have found the regulatory requirements to be daunting, or may not be fully aware that an area they want to convert to annual cropland is subject to permitting requirements. When landowners are contemplating clearing land or changing land status, the preferred approach is for the producer to work proactively with the state and federal agencies to develop a mutually agreeable farm plan that avoids, minimizes, and mitigates any potential adverse impacts to natural resources. In the past, a number of farmers have undertaken the conversion of sizable areas of land without first consulting federal or state agency representatives. In some situations, state and federal regulations have been violated. In a few cases, regulatory agencies have imposed civil penalties on the farmers and required expensive restoration and mitigation measures to be implemented. Other farmers are foregoing increases in crop production because of fears associated with regulations, even when they may have need for additional on-farm feed.

Required Components of the Pro-Active Farm Plan Project: An interagency work group has been formed that will select two to four farms to participate in a pilot project to develop a comprehensive, long-range farm plan. Projects must be completed within two years of the award date. The producer will be expected to work with the consultant, providing the following types of information needed to support the development of a farm plan:

1. Crop production needs over the next five to ten years. These goals will have to be expressed in acres of crop fields.
2. Non-cropland areas that are believed capable of producing crops. This evaluation may include land already under the producer's control, as well as new lands the producer is considering for acquisition. As part of this evaluation, any newly developed cropland must be evaluated in terms of its crop production capability, including the identification of any limiting characteristics (such as wetness and fertility).
3. Areas for potential mitigation of any resource impacts caused by converting fallow land into productive annual cropland. These areas may be on land owned by the producer or on lands owned by others willing to be co-participants in the project.
4. Potential alternative sites for mitigation of any remaining resource impacts.

Proposal Submissions: Interested farm landowners should prepare a brief proposal, not to exceed two pages, that:

1. Describes your interest in developing a pro-active plan for your farm. Please include information on the land areas you are most interested in pursuing for improved agricultural yield production, and areas where you see the potential for increased wildlife habitat and wetland functions. The information about these areas must include approximate acreages and a description of current and historical land management; maps identifying specific land areas are encouraged.
2. Provides a summary of the farming operation and describes broad goals for the farm in the next 5 to 10 years, and how the proposed land use changes could impact these goals. Please note that, if selected, a part of the project will include a detailed five year plan. For this proposal, please indicate only broad goals that express your intent for being considered as a participating farm in this pilot project.
3. Lists conservation practices you are actively performing, including whether you operate using a Nutrient Management Plan (NMP), if you utilize cover cropping or other soil erosion reduction practices, and any alternative methods of nutrient land application and/or cropping patterns/types you employ on your farm. An NRCS '590' standard NMP is required for participants in this pilot project. If you do not already have a plan, you will be expected to develop one; cost-share assistance is available for NMP development.
4. Indicates additional conservation practices that you are interested in pursuing on your farm. If there are limitations that have prevented you from implementing these practices, please describe.
5. Indicates whether the areas you are considering for this project have had Highly Erodible Land (HEL) and Wetland determinations done by the Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS) or other applicable entity.

Questions in regards to this Request for Proposals can be directed to Kip Potter at kip.potter@vt.usda.gov or by phone 802-951-6796, x238.

Project applications (e-mail or hard copy) must be received no later than May 1, 2009 at:

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