



STEWARDS OF THE LAND

A publication for owners of land conserved with the Vermont Land Trust

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Vermont's Current Use Program: *Keeping the Working Landscape Alive*

BY DARBY BRADLEY

Like land conservation, Use Value Appraisal (more commonly known as "Current Use") lies at the very foundation of Vermont's effort to preserve its working land and rural heritage. For the past 29 years, people who actively manage their property for agricultural and forest products could elect to have the land taxed on the basis of its productive value rather than its development potential. Without Current Use, few people could afford to make the investments in the land upon

which our agricultural, forestry, and tourism industries depend.

Current Use is what made it possible for Steve Morse and his family to hold onto their land. The Morse family operates a VLT-conserved dairy farm in Whitingham. In addition to milk, the family also sells hay, draft and carriage horses, maple products, firewood, and logs. The farm has been in the family since Steve's grandfather purchased the land in 1905. In 1998, the Morse family conserved land with VLT and used the proceeds to purchase additional land. Steve's son lives and

works on the farm and plans to carry on the family's farming tradition. Steve shared with VLT the importance of Current Use to the farm's continued existence. "Speaking as an active farmer and sugarmaker, it's the difference between survival and not," said Steve. "If Current Use didn't exist, our taxes would go from \$6,000 a year to roughly \$24,000. We might be able to ride that out for one year, but after that, I'd have to sell the cows and look for a job off the farm."

Land conservation, combined with Current Use, also helps to sustain large tracts of working forestland, slowing the fragmentation of Vermont's forests and supporting both wildlife and the timber industry. Dick Rose of Mendon owns conserved forestland in the Chateauguay–No Town region, a conservation priority area for VLT. "Before Current Use, we had to sell some land almost every year, just to pay the taxes," remembered Dick. "If Current Use didn't exist, we probably wouldn't have had any land left to conserve."

Last spring, in the closing weeks of the 2009 legislative session, a series of proposals emerged that could have significantly eroded the principles which underlie Current Use. While the



Steve Morse credits Current Use with helping him keep his dairy farm, which has been in the family since 1905.

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Legislature was struggling to balance the budget under trying circumstances, VLT and others resisted making fundamental changes to the law before legislators took the time to evaluate the consequences and considered alternatives.

The Legislature withdrew the proposals in the final hours of the session, but confirmed that the issue would be back on the table in January. Most recently, the Legislature's target is to reduce Current Use expenditures or increase revenues by approximately \$1.6 million.

Over the summer, representatives of VLT, Vermont Farm Bureau, Rural Vermont, Vermont Woodlands Association, The Nature Conservancy in Vermont, Vermont Audubon, and Vermont Natural Resources Council met to identify issues, develop alternatives, and weigh the costs and benefits of different approaches. The working group focused not just on

the money, but on ways to strengthen Current Use so that it will operate more effectively, efficiently, and fairly in the future. In September, the group issued a draft report, not as a firm recommendation, but to share ideas for discussion and improvement. The paper identifies the major problems in

“In an era when few people grow up on farms or know about forest management, Current Use’s requirement for a management plan has brought hundreds of owners together with foresters, where they have learned about the ecology of their land and the benefits of good management.”

— Pieter van Loon,
VLT Stewardship Forester

the present structure and administration of Current Use and presents a package of reforms to correct them. It also includes an analysis of alternatives which were considered, but ultimately rejected. The full report can be found on VLT’s website, www.vlt.org.

Throughout the next few months, VLT and its partners will be seeking feedback from landowners, legislators, state officials, and other organizations. We will then refine the proposals based upon the feedback we receive. We’d like to learn how Current Use has affected your ownership of land and your decisions about its management.

Please send your comments and stories to darby@vlt.org.