

Fall 2020 ENVS 0401 Community-Engaged Practicum: Beyond Equity: Justice in (and for) the Future of Vermont

Overarching Context

As we stand at this nexus of a global pandemic, widespread and structural racism, and the climate emergency, Vermont's environmental leaders have called for actions that simultaneously address all three of these emergencies as the only plausible path towards long-term resilience and sustainability. For example, a diverse coalition of organizations recently called on Vermont's congressional delegation to ensure that any COVID response and stimulus efforts to rebuild communities *must* make communities more resilient to climate change and improve environmental quality, public health and equity.¹ Across a wide range of sectors, the COVID crisis has laid bare the "structural and intersectional barriers" impacting marginalized people in Vermont and has made "systems of inequity even more evident...exacerbating all known disparities across housing, education, employment, health services access and the justice system."² Social service agencies and non-profits serving Vermonters are urging state lawmakers to, "defend human rights and racial, social, and economic justice, environmental protections, and true democracy" when making important policy decisions.³

Our community partners this fall are deeply committed to justice work as they strive towards climate resilience, food justice, and equity and inclusion in outdoor recreation. Each of these partners sees the present historical moment — with all of its challenges—to be an unprecedented opportunity to re-imagine their work and forge new partnerships and coalitions. A late spring editorial in Vermont's *Rutland Herald* captured this sentiment exactly:

*"How often do we, as a society, get a chance to hit the reset button. And yet, here we are — presented with one that can, in effect, change our lives, change our policies and change our narrative about how we talk about, politicize and obsess over certain issues.... Across Vermont — and the nation — COVID has revealed our stark inequities, in income, privilege and so much more. It has refocused society to basics; it has forced our reliance on technology, sometimes revealing better routes toward streamlining and eliminating waste; it has forced unlikely partnerships. But what lawmakers have before them right now is an opportunity for a brain trust of the Vermont community. For years, decades, actually, Vermont has struggled to reach consensus on its greatest challenges.... Lawmakers need to seize this moment, while people have some time to think, to build partnerships and engage a cross-section of our population, with a range of expertise and skills, to solve (or resolve) some of these pressing issues."*⁴

Our partners are all excited to engage you as part of this "brain trust" and are eager for your energy, creative thinking, and research acumen as we tackle pieces of these pressing issues collaboratively.

Below, you will find details for each project, the community partner(s) you will be working with and the description of the specific project need. Needless to say, the contours and details of those needs will be further developed as you begin your work collaboratively with your partners.

¹ <https://vnrc.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/COVID-Response-and-Rebuilding-Investment-Recommendations.pdf>

² <https://vermontconservationvoters.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Equity-Through-Access-in-COVID-19-Response-Legislator-Letter.docx.pdf>

³ <https://vermontconservationvoters.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/2020-Vision-for-Vermont.pdf>

⁴ https://www.rutlandherald.com/opinion/editorials/reset-button/article_6166c669-9a6b-56e7-a957-b09caaa98c0d.html

Project #1: Charting a 5-10-year Strategy for Programming at the Intersection of Food, Climate, and Racial Justice

Partner: Mollie Wills, Grassroots Organizing Director, Rural Vermont

Background

Rural Vermont is a grassroots organization with a vision “for a Vermont local food system which is self-reliant and based on reverence for the earth. It builds living soils which nurture animals and people with wholesome, natural products supporting healthy, thriving farms and communities.” With a mission to “lead the resurgence of community-scale agriculture through education, advocacy, and organizing in support of Vermonters living in deep connection to one another and to the land” Rural Vermont’s staff are committed to work that grows and sustains vital and healthy rural economies and communities. This work is grounded in the belief that “family farms and the local food that they provide are at the heart of thriving communities and environmental sustainability and that economic justice for family farmers is the foundation of a healthy rural economy.”⁵

While Rural Vermont has been working in the space of environment and equity for over 30 years, the organization’s most recent policy statement (May 2020) highlights the need at this historical moment to amplify the voices of farmers and advocate for “an agricultural system that is scale-appropriate and built on equity, justice, dignity, and reverence for the earth. The COVID-19 pandemic painfully highlights the vital need for resilient local food systems, and brings to light the disparities and gaps in our current system. As we all move through this crisis, Rural Vermont’s intention is to support all farmers and farmworkers to whatever extent possible, while prioritizing those most vulnerable, such as the migrant farmworker community and those without food security.”⁶

As with our other partners this semester, Rural Vermont is calling for policies and programs that speak to current realities and address the suite of intersecting crises by centering food sovereignty, racial justice, and climate action.⁷ As part of these efforts, Rural Vermont is beginning the process of charting a vision for their programming and advocacy work over the next 5-10 years.

Project Need

A key component of Rural Vermont’s ability to define future priorities is to gain current information from its members (primarily small diversified farms). When last surveyed in 2018, the emergent policy priorities included not only the more “obvious” focal areas of water quality, pesticides, and on-farm slaughter, but also areas of inequity such as transportation, housing, health care, and child care, needs that are not traditionally seen as “agricultural,” but that are crucial to the flourishing of Vermont’s Farms and Farm Families. Rural Vermont is asking for this team to help design and implement a new survey for their constituency about what is impacting them now and what we they need to work on to best support farmers. Your partners have a strong desire to work towards long-term, systemic change, and survey questions should therefore be strongly influenced by the intersecting challenges (and opportunities) created by both COVID and renewed calls for racial justice . While questions on issues that Rural Vermont is currently working on (i.e. raw milk, on-farm slaughter, hemp, cannabis, poultry foraging, healthcare) would be included, digging into racial justice and other intersectional "non-agriculture" issues will inform Rural Vermont’s staff about how they can best orient and plan for this desired change.

⁵ <https://www.ruralvermont.org/>

⁶ <https://www.ruralvermont.org/s/policy-update.pdf>

⁷ <https://nffc.net/what-we-do/food-sovereignty/>

The goals for this student team are:

- *Survey Design*: Collaboratively design a member survey with Rural Vermont staff, addressing not only the key desired content areas detailed above, but also responding to survey design feedback they received in 2018.
- *Survey Analysis*: Rural VT staff and volunteers will help disseminate the survey and conduct phone- and in-person outreach to ensure a both a high response rate and that responses are representative of their membership (geographically, farm size, farm type, etc.). This team can help with the collection of responses as well during the time in which the survey is open. Your role post-dissemination will be to conduct a rigorous statistical analysis of the results and to develop visually creative ways of displaying the data.
- *Follow-up Interviews*: As time allows, it would be both rewarding for this team and quite helpful for Rural Vermont for you to conduct follow-up phone and/or video-based interviews with respondents to dig into any responses that you found to be particularly interesting and relevant to your partner's goals. Use your creativity for ways to portray these stories alongside the quantitative data, recognizing that story-telling is often an effective way to communicate "data" and to advocate for change.

Project #2: Communicating Agriculture's Central Role in Holistic Solutions

Partner, Grace Oedel, Executive Director, Northeast Organic Farming Association of Vermont (NOFA-VT)

Background

As a regional organization, NOFA-VT has long recognized the need for diverse and unique coalitions & partnerships and social justice has stood as a core part of its mission: "The Northeast Organic Farming Association of Vermont promotes organic practices to build an economically viable, ecologically sound and socially just Vermont agricultural system that benefits all living things."⁸ In this historical moment, NOFA-VT is recommitting itself to intersectional movement work and asking itself critical questions such as "what does a durable and just network that can do intersectional work really look like?" and "how can we bring some of our core members along in seeing the connections between agriculture, climate, and racial equity?"

As part of this recommitment, NOFA-VT has already forged some new partnerships, for example by signing on as a supporter of the Renew New England Alliance, a coalition of "grassroots organizations, labor unions, racial justice groups, frontline communities, and environmental advocates [who have] come together to address our region's overlapping crises: mass unemployment, racial injustice, the coronavirus pandemic, and climate change." Renew New England Alliance's initiatives include: "developing policies and programs, conducting public education and building grassroots power to achieve a regionwide Jobs Guarantee, universal healthcare, affordable housing, racial justice, and bold climate action."⁹ Further, NOFA-VT is trying to center racial justice and equity within their broader advocacy work. To this end, NOFA-VT has already partnered with New England Farmers of Color and the National Family Farm Coalition.^{10,11} Reflecting on their own practices as an organization, NOFA VT staff are striving to seek funding from more diverse sources. They have acknowledged entrenched racism in traditional concepts of farm viability and are leading both internal and consultant-based anti-racism training for their staff.

Project Need

In exploring new partnerships and coalitions, NOFA-VT is increasingly confronted with how often agriculture is omitted or even ignored as a key part of a suite of holistic solutions. This was true, for example, in some versions of Vermont's Green New Deal proposals as well as a range of statewide forums addressing housing, health care, and transportation needs. NOFA-VT is eager to communicate 1) the mantra that "racial justice is food justice is climate justice"; 2) that agriculture, food security, and food sovereignty need to be front and center as solutions are crafted that seek to address these long emergencies; and 3) that Vermont can be a leader in this space.

NOFA-VT runs an impressive array of programs, but does not have additional marketing and communications capacity to take on this project so this is where a student team will play a crucial role this semester. The goals for this student team are:

- Develop clear communications materials on the three focal areas detailed above. These materials would ideally be designed for *two audiences* – the first priority being Vermont legislators/policy-makers and the second priority being a broader public audience.
- While these materials should be Vermont-specific, students should conduct research that draws not only on Vermont's stories and successes, but also on other successful intersectional communications regionally, nationally, or internationally.
- Develop a communications plan for how these materials should be strategically disseminated (i.e. in response to current legislation under consideration, upcoming public forums, etc.)

⁸ <https://nofavt.org/about-us>

⁹ <https://renewnewenglandalliance.org/>

¹⁰ <https://nefoclandtrust.org/>

¹¹ <https://nffc.net/>

Project #3: Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion in Recreation

Partners: Vermont Department of Forest Parks and Recreation with, Jessica Savage, Recreation Program Manager, Rebecca Roy, Conservation Program Manager, and Nate McKeen, State Lands Manager

Background

The Vermont Department of Forests, Parks and Recreation (FPR) is “responsible for the conservation and management of Vermont's forest resources, the operation and maintenance of the State Park system, and the promotion and support of outdoor recreation for Vermonters and our visitors. In addition, FPR is responsible for the acquisition, planning coordination and administration of all Agency of Natural Resources lands.”¹²

For the recreation arm of its work, FPR completed at the beginning of this year its 2020 Statewide Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan (SCORP). Given continually shifting demographics, environmental conditions, public interests, and recreation trends, the state develops a new plan every five years. Through a public survey and public comment opportunities, FPR staff craft a plan that identifies outdoor recreation strategies that help to address the needs and desires expressed by Vermonters.¹³ The five priorities of the 2020 SCORP are:

1. Stewardship of Natural Resources and Recreation Areas
2. Stakeholder Communication, Coordination, and Engagement
3. Public Participation and Access for All
4. Community Connection, Health, and Wellness
5. Economic Vitality and Tourism

While recognizing that all of these recreation priorities are intertwined, your team’s efforts will be focused on priority #3, “Public Participation and Access for All.” Your partners recognize the need for—and have set as a key goal—making state parks and state lands (e.g. recreation trails and back-country dispersed recreation opportunities) more welcoming to Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC). There is clear research that human beings benefit from connection with nature and part of FPR’s mission is to provide that benefit. While FPR has made good accommodations for access for folks with physical disabilities, they know they need to do more for BIPOC communities. This need for more enhanced and equitable access to recreation spaces and places has been and continues to be even more deeply underscored through the COVID pandemic.

Project Need

The question of moving beyond mere “access” to welcoming full participation of all communities is a rich and nuanced area for exploration and there are several large and interrelated questions that our partners have posed for you to help them address. Key questions they are struggling with include 1) how to identify potential users, 2) what are existing barriers to accessing current recreation opportunities, and 3) how to best gain an understanding of different cultures’ perspectives on what experiences different cultural groups most desire (i.e. is the main barrier that the state isn’t offering all the types of experiences that people would *want* to access or are the main barriers related to accessing current opportunities).

The goal of this student team is to help your partners at FPR gain a more fundamental understanding of the problems they seek to address, highlighting challenges and opportunities that will help FPR develop action plans for becoming more welcoming.

¹² <https://anr.vermont.gov/forests-parks-rec>

¹³ <https://fpr.vermont.gov/news/shaping-future-outdoor-recreation-scorp>

This will be accomplished by:

- Researching and developing case studies of successful approaches of other companion organizations, agencies and states. These case studies should outline methods utilized, provide guiding frameworks and best practices, and detail how / if consultants and partner groups were involved.
- Relatedly, help FPR gain an understanding of the breadth of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) advocacy groups in Vermont so that FPR can best work collaboratively with new partner organizations. While FPR has already established extensive collaboration with outdoor recreation groups in Vermont (see details below), they are looking to forge new partnerships and collaborations with DEI groups to best achieve collaborative goals.
 - For your background, FPR worked with the Vermont Outdoor Business Alliance (VOBA) to develop a fairly comprehensive list of diversity, equity, and inclusion statements and resources developed by Vermont outdoor companies, VOBA members and partners to “support ongoing education, communication, collaboration, and action for the outdoors community” – see <https://www.vermontoutdoorbusinessalliance.org/diversity-equity-and-inclusion-resources>
 - Two FPR representatives serve on the Vermont Agency of Natural Resources Diversity and Equity Committee and FPR also leads the Vermont Outdoor Recreation Economic Collaborative (VOREC).
- Developing methods: What data are needed? How will FPR know when they know enough to take action toward becoming more welcoming?
- Highlighting what the hard work will look like – i.e. helping FPR staff to identify what uncomfortable barriers need to be recognized and addressed before progress can be made
- Beginning to frame / make recommendations for a phased approach – i.e. “Here are things that are doable right away, here are the things that will take some time, and here are the things that will need a broader cultural shift.”

Project #4: Crafting Equitable Policy in Association with Vermont's Global Warming Solutions Act (GWSA) and Vermont's Energy Transition

Partners: Johanna Miller, Energy and Climate Program Director, Vermont Natural Resources Council and Lauren Hierl, Executive Director, Vermont Conservation Voters

Background

There is national and international recognition of how racism manifests itself in energy policy. One recent article highlights four common manifestations:¹⁴

- 1) "I can't breathe", in this case referring to racial disparities related to air pollution and other environmental impacts of energy.
- 2) "Paying more and getting less from energy" – a trend also seen here in Vermont as per the most recent report from Efficiency Vermont on energy burden¹⁵ (annual spending on energy as a proportion of income).
- 3) "Myopic clean energy equity programs: Well-meaning programs and incentives can go only so far if they fail to take a broader view of inequalities."
- 4) "Lack of representation: Organizations that design policies, programs and products usually are controlled by white people. That lack of diversity around the table leads to a lack of diversity in solutions."

Further, it has been asserted that "the movement for a transition to a decarbonized economy cannot succeed until there are structural changes in society to redress centuries of systemic racism. The tight coupling of race and climate change seems incongruous at first glance. People commonly regard climate change as a problem to be worked out by scientists and engineers. The linkage between the degradation of global ecosystems and a profoundly moral social issue like racism is not immediately evident."¹⁶

These issues and connections are front and center for our partners as they have been tirelessly advocating for not only the crafting and passage of Vermont's Global Warming Solutions Act, but also the development of policies and programs to achieve GWSA goals after it is hopefully enacted into law this fall. The GWSA bill will "transform Vermont's existing emission reduction goals into requirements. It establishes a Vermont Climate Council and directs the Vermont Agency of Natural Resources to put regulations and policies in place to achieve the required cuts and build the resilience of Vermont communities and natural systems. In doing so, it fosters innovation and resilience. The bill requires climate solutions that reduce energy burdens for rural and marginalized communities, build rural resilience, and promote the use of natural and working lands to capture and store carbon. It also creates a framework for ongoing climate action."¹⁷ The act calls for four strategic subcommittees focused on resilience and adaptation; mitigation; equity and justice; and the role of farms and forests in this transition. An overarching goal is that policies and programs make smart investments that prioritize Vermont's most vulnerable residents. Further, our partners have already put out the following appeal to VT legislators regarding COVID recovery and stimulus plans:¹⁸

¹⁴ <https://www.greenbiz.com/article/how-racism-manifests-clean-energy>

¹⁵ <https://www.encyvermont.com/Media/Default/docs/white-papers/2019%20Vermont%20Energy%20Burden%20Report.pdf>

¹⁶ <https://www.wbur.org/cognoscenti/2020/06/09/the-links-between-racism-and-the-environment-frederick-hewett>

¹⁷ https://vermontconservationvoters.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/2020_01_31_FINAL_VT-GWSA-Fact-Sheet.pdf

¹⁸ https://vermontconservationvoters.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Equity-Through-Access-in-COVID-19-Response_Legislator-Letter.docx.pdf

“Policies can widen the gap of inequity, keep it the same, or work to bridge that gap. We ask that as you make important decisions on how to spend federal funds, create a state budget, and make policy decisions related to COVID-19 response and recovery, you keep these issues at the forefront of your mind and take the following questions into consideration:

- 1. Am I unintentionally reinforcing systems of inequity?*
- 2. Is this policy proportional to the threat, and no more intrusive on civil liberties than absolutely necessary?*
- 3. Are there opportunities I haven’t taken advantage of to further promote equity?*
- 4. Did I get enough community input on this policy – are there other stakeholders I should engage?*
- 5. Am I leaving anyone behind?”*

Project Need

Our partners have noted that not all legislators will know what equitable climate and energy policy truly looks like, so have identified the need to make these policies (and the visions informing them) more tangible. Further, there is a need to highlight the “whys and hows” of weaving equity and climate justice together. These needs are even more acute now. How Vermont pivots and responds in this historical moment will be critical. This moment of crisis (i.e. the four long emergencies of climate change, severe economic inequality, racism, and the global pandemic) is an opportunity to re-envision how Vermont does things so that we may live differently and more compassionately with one another. All of this research will be of use even if the bill does *not* pass this finish line this September (although it is close!).

The goals of for this student team are to:

- Research what other states, with similar goals have done thus far. How might the strategies and practices of other states be transferrable to VT? Build on the initial case-study work completed this summer by the Vermont Energy Action Network.¹⁹ Key factors to include in this analysis are:
 - What types of policies should be considered
 - What types of processes are considered by others to be “best practices”
 - What is working well in other states?
 - What roadblocks can / should we avoid?
 - What have co-benefits emerged (i.e. job creation, other economic values)?
- Evaluate / Assess the spatial and demographic dimensions of equitable and just climate policy.
 - What components / considerations are there based on demographic, geographic, and racial differences?
- Help to identify possible new collaborators / partners within social justice organizations that climate and energy programs have not traditionally partnered with, e.g. Black Lives Matter and the Peace and Justice Center of Vermont.

Your recommendations should be based on VT’s more unique context of predominantly Caucasian residents—with real racial issues that need addressing, as well as serious economic disparities. Other questions to ponder as you delve into this work include: How can we mobilize a majority white populace to stand up for equity and justice across the board? What is the role of white leadership in this movement?

¹⁹ <https://www.eanvt.org/tracking-progress/research-and-reports/energy-equity/> see “EAN and Equity: An Initial Investigation”