

History of the Working Lands Enterprise Board Forestry Committee and the Vermont Forest Industry Network

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2014 – 2015

- A Forestry Committee made up of WLEB members was created for the purpose of exploring ways to identify forest and wood products business needs as a means of informing the Board's grant making process. In late 2013, WLEB set aside \$100,000 and issued an RFP to assist the committee in developing a forest industry analysis. An additional \$10,000 was raised from the High Meadows Fund to support the final report production and distribution. Yellow Wood Associates in St. Albans was selected as the vendor and they worked closely with the Forestry Committee over the next 18 months as a stakeholder engagement process was conducted. A directory (Atlas) of all known wood and forest products businesses was also assembled to aid the team in reaching out to stakeholders throughout the process.
- WLEB Forestry Committee released the final report, the Vermont Forest Sector Systems Analysis ([See related documents here](#)), in February 2016. The report included recommendations for action across the entire supply chain and has been used to guide grant making decisions since that time.
- VSJF offered to fundraise with partners to work with WLEB Forestry Committee to implement recommendations in the Analysis, including a full-time staff to develop and manage a Vermont Forest Industry Network, modeled, in part, after the successful Farm to Plate Network that serves agriculture and food systems businesses.

Beginning August 2016

- VSJF hires Christine McGowan as the Director of its Forest Products Program
- McGowan visits dozens of forest and wood products businesses in Vermont; attends Vermont industry trade organization meetings and helps organize an industry listening session in Bradford, following up with recommendations to the WLEB Forestry Committee and Policy Committee to address workers compensation and sales tax exemption issues facing the industry;
- VSJF drafts a Network plan and shares it with the forestry committee and other stakeholders for feedback. The primary areas of focus are developing an industry-led Network; developing an industry level communications strategy; developing value chain activities around three key areas of interest (based on recommendations from the Forest Sector Systems Analysis report): construction (mass timber), product aggregation (local wood), modern wood heat. Work begins on value chain activities to support the industry, including:
 - Hosting a Mass Timber Meet Up (Beyond Steel and Concrete), in partnership with the WLEB Forestry Committee, in Stowe to explore the potential of mass timber in Vermont and the region;
 - Hosting a State Wood Energy Team retreat and facilitating a Market Development exercise that was vetted with industry experts and given to BERCC

and REV to create a roadmap for the biomass sector's growth in modern wood heat. Marketing is identified as the greatest need.

2017

Network Coordination

- VSJF facilitates WLEB Forestry Committee retreat at Trapp Family Lodge and discusses creating a Network Steering Committee to govern the new Network. VSJF suggests that the WLEB forestry committee transform into the inaugural steering committee, but the committee could not come to consensus on that and decides that the forestry committee will continue as a separate entity, with representation on the steering committee. VSJF decides to focus on getting three value chain action teams up and running before naming a Steering Committee, as these would be some of the key leaders on a Network Steering Committee.

Value Chain Development

- VSJF facilitates meetings to assess interest in forming Value Chain Action Teams focused on issues raised in the Forest Sector Systems Analysis: Wood Heat, Local Wood, Mass Timber.

Mass Timber Action Team

- VSJF invites a member of the Ecovation Hub (Brattleboro) to attend the Mass Timber Conference in Portland, Ore., where they identify several New England-based industry members interested in pursuing mass timber projects and business opportunities in New England.
 - VSJF hosts a regional mass timber meeting to share information across the region, and the VT-based attendees agree to form a Vermont Mass Timber Action Team, and that group begins meeting monthly.
 - Original Mass Timber Action Team Roster:
 1. Wood Works (Ricky McLain)
 2. Eli Gould (contractor)
 3. Bensonwood (Chris Carbone)
 4. Stevens and Associates (Jillian Tomaselli)
 5. Sandra Vitzhum (architect)
 6. Vermont Housing and Conservation Board (Craig Peltier)
 7. Northern Forest Center (Joe Short)
 8. University of Vermont (Tony D'Amato)
 9. Norwich University (Edwin Schmeckpeper)
 10. University of Maine Orono (Russel Edgar; Ben Herzog)
 11. Department of Forests, Parks and Recreation (Paul Frederick)
 12. Department of Buildings and General Services (Robert Hepburn)
 13. Brattleboro Development Corporation (Jennifer Stromsten)
- Local Wood Action Team
 - VSJF and the WLEB Forestry Committee convene a meet up, *Local Wood, Local Good*, at UVM focused on developing a strategy to encourage more

local wood sourcing, attracting approximately 70 attendees. A smaller group of attendees agrees to convene to form an action team.

Original Local Wood Action Team Roster:

1. A. Johnson Company (Bill Sayre; Jas Smith)
2. Currier Forest Products (Joel Currier)
3. Treehouse Hardwoods and Mill Shop (Lucas Jenson)
4. Maple Landmark (Mike Rainville)
5. Northern Forest Center (Dave Redmond)
6. Vermont Wood Works Council (Erin Lorentz)
7. Vermont Housing and Conservation Board (Ian Hartman)
8. Vermont Woodlands Association (Kathleen Wanner)
9. Department of Forests, Parks and Recreation (Paul Frederick)
10. Department of Economic Development (Tim Tierney)

○ Wood Heat Action Team

- VSJF was asked to facilitate a market development project with the State Wood Energy Team (SWET) with the goal of creating a value chain action team to take over for the SWET team whose funding had recently ended; the Action Team meets twice, but in the meantime, FPR hires Emma Hanson as its new wood heat coordinator, and NFC receives funding to launch a regional Feel Good Heat marketing campaign. Subsequently, the SWET team decides to continue in its previous form, and not to become an action team.

Original Wood Heat Action Team Roster

1. Department of Forests, Parks and Recreation (Paul Frederick; Emma Hanson)
2. Biomass Energy Resource Center (Adam Sherman)
3. Department of Public Service/CEDF (Andy Perchlik)
4. Pellerly (Andy Boutin)
5. Sunwood Biomass (Dave Frank)
6. Renewable Energy Vermont (Ansley Bloomer)
7. Northern Forest Center (Maura Adams)
8. Jeff Rubin (consultant)
9. Jeff Forward (consultant)
10. Energy Action Network (Jared Duval)

Communications Strategy

- VSJF convenes a communications task force comprised of representatives from ACCD, FPR, VWA, VFPA, VWMA and NFC to help develop an industry level communications strategy; conducts a thorough review of the Vermont Wood Products Marketing Council brand strategy from the early 2000s; meets with Department of Tourism staff, and hires a consultant to conduct a survey to better assess current perceptions of the industry that would inform updated messaging and a new industry level communications strategy.

- VSJF assists the Vermont Wood Manufacturers Association in facilitating a board retreat (VSJF also serves as the group’s fiscal agent for a small VCF strategic planning grant) at which they decide to re-brand the organization to strengthen its ability to serve Vermont’s wood producers, large and small. The new name, Vermont Wood Works Council, is unveiled at its annual meeting in January 2018, and VSJF gives the organization \$5,000 to help re-brand its website to include enhanced listings for member-businesses to further market their products.

2018

WLEB September Symposium

1. Enhancing Management of Working Lands Businesses.

Discussion:

Much work has been and is currently being done by numerous agencies with and independent of WLEB funding to provide education, training, and technical assistance to elevate the management capacity of Working Lands businesses. WLEB and service providers need to identify barriers and gaps and get creative about how to expand, enhance and deliver support and conduct outreach to Working Lands grantees, as well as for these businesses generally.

This means understanding where WL businesses get information and use those business networks and advisors (trade associations, conferences, insurance agents, bookkeepers, accountants, financiers, legal, etc.) to communicate with and engage business owners in educational opportunities. WLEB needs to develop targeted communication/messaging that resonates with WL business owners, shares benchmark sector data, evaluates current curriculum and delivery alternatives, and reviews metrics. The sense of the WLEB is that there are sufficient service providers, tools and programs; the challenge is connecting those resources to WL businesses, preferably before the business needs help most.

For WL grantees, WLEB wants to explore adding value to investments by:

- Including business training and technical assistance, perhaps a business coach, i.e. pairing funds with direct assistance.
- Monitoring and evaluating grantees as a ready-made cohort to test/pilot for what works helps with business development.
- Focus on types of assistance and methods of delivery of business executive skills, opportunities for shared learning between seasoned and new business owners, and relaying experience about resources

Outcomes:

- Committee established (Executive Business Skills) to review FY19 symposium notes, evaluate service provider training and technical assistance metrics, identify gaps, challenges, opportunities in services, delivery, outreach and prepare proposal to submit to the WLE Board for how to address this issue for FY20. Committee members include

Sam Lincoln, Ted Brady, Beth Kennett, Alyson Eastman, Eric DeLuca, Ellen Kahler, Ela Chapin, Laura Ginsburg and Lynn Ellen Schimoler.

- In collaboration with AAFM, FPR and VSJF, the Working Lands Business Development Directory is developed to make it easier to find service providers who can work with farm, food, forest and wood products business owners. The tool allows an enterprise to search for contact information of various service providers who have particular expertise sought by businesses, along the stages of business development. <https://workinglands.vermont.gov/working-lands-business-development-continuum>
- Via the Executive Business Skills Committee, in FY20, the Vermont Working Lands Enterprise Initiative funded the development of two new mobile web apps for loggers and portable sawmill owners with this in mind. Log-in-Vermont allows loggers to calculate profit and return on investment (ROI) on a weekly, monthly, or individual job basis. i-Saw-Vermont allows portable sawmill owners to determine profit and ROI for custom sawing jobs or for weekly or monthly production. The apps were developed by Dr. Steven Bick of Northeast Forests LLC in North Fayston.

2. WLEB Increasing Grans to Match Scale of Forestry and Commodity Agriculture.

Discussion:

Current size of WLEB grants (\$500-\$20,000, \$20,000 to \$50,000) does not create opportunity to impact forest products businesses or commodity agriculture such as dairy. Only \$60,000 of funding went to forest product businesses. Grants are primarily helping direct market or value-added agriculture businesses. Need to scale investments broadly.

Outcomes:

1. Pilot a \$150,000 grant for one grantee in the low-grade wood industry; also open to dairy industry. If high quality applications are not received, one or both large grant allocations can be funneled back into smaller grants.

2. Business Grant scales for FY19:

\$150,000 for low-grade forest products

\$150,000 for dairy (if quality application received, or possible 2nd award for forest products)

\$100,000 for smaller business grants, \$5000-\$20,000

Funded Impact Industry Forestry projects in FY19:

Gagnon Lumber – \$120,000

Kirby Mulch – \$130,000

WLEB awards VSJF \$70,000 for Vermont Forest Products Value Chain Investment Strategy work.

Network Development

- VSJF and the WLEB forestry committee organize the 1st annual Vermont Forest Industry Summit at Burke Mountain Resort, attracting 152 industry members, and a forestry bill signing ceremony by Gov. Phil Scott. The event becomes the official launch the Vermont Forest Industry Network.

Value Chain Development

- Mass Timber Action Team
 - VSJF provides funding for a small delegation from Vermont (members of the mass timber action team) to attend the Mass Timber Conference in Portland, Ore. in an effort to expose them to key players in this emerging industry; the team organizes a series of educational events aimed at architects and developers in Vermont;
 - The Mass Timber Action Team engages a local group of architects and developers in Brattleboro to study the potential of using mass timber in a downtown housing project. VSJF contracts with the project architect to create a case study to compare the use of traditional building materials or mass timber in the project in order to identify specific barriers for the use of mass timber. The study was used by WoodWorks to better understand where mass timber is best suited for similar projects. While it did not result in the use of mass timber, the study did compel the architect to specify more wood in the building project, and to pursue additional local wood products such as flooring, cabinetry and other finish details.
 - The Mass Timber Action Team meets with state officials in Montpelier, and later in St. Johnsbury with city officials to explore the potential of a new state office building being constructed with mass timber. While there is interest, the project is put on hold as officials pursue an appropriate site location.
- Local Wood Action Team
 - VSJF hosts a kick-off meeting of a Local Wood Action Team, and the group identifies two areas of focus: a potential online tool to connect Vermont wood suppliers (mills) and buyers (secondary manufacturers/woodworkers); and a Vermont Wood Tour aimed at architects and other potential buyers.
 - The group develops the Vermont Wood Forum, a simple Google Group housed on the VWWC website to test out the use of an online platform to connect

suppliers and buyers. The group was slow in adopting the Google Group in 2018, and efforts continued into 2019 to encourage its use.

Communications Strategy

- The Network establishes a logo and mark, and launches a communications strategy aimed at improving the industry's reputation with Vermonters and visitors; VSJF hires a photographer and communications strategist to assist in the execution; VSJF also shares the content with industry trade organizations and begins presenting at their meetings to encourage more storytelling by industry representatives.
- The Network produces 15 stories as part of the communications strategy.
- The Network creates a 2019 Network calendar featuring photos taken throughout the year and sends it to Summit attendees, industry leaders and state and federal lawmakers.
- VSJF provides significant staff support to produce a video about the Life of a Tree, a partnership project between Cabot Creamery and the Vermont Wood Works Council that was part of Cabot's 2019 Centennial Celebration. [The video can be viewed here.](#) The goal of the project was to produce a high-quality video that can live on the Vermont Wood Works Council website to help consumers make a stronger connection between the forests they love and the wood products they buy. The Department of Tourism uses the video at the Big E in 2019.

2019

Network Development

- An inaugural meeting of the Vermont Forest Industry Network Steering Committee is held in January 2019.
 - Steering Committee Members include:
 - Trevor Allard, Allard Lumber/Vermont Forest Products Association Board
 - David Frank, Sunwood Biomass/Renewable Energy Vermont Board
 - Paul Frederick, Vermont Department of Forests, Parks and Recreation
 - Charlie Hancock, North Woods Forestry/Working Lands Enterprise Board
 - Liz Gleason, Vermont Housing and Conservation Board (*replaced Ian Hartman*)
 - Lucas Jenson, Treehouse Hardwoods and Millshop, president, Vermont Wood Works Council board
 - Ricky McLain, WoodWorks, Inc.
 - Mike Rainville, Maple Landmark, WLEB forestry committee (*Erin Lorentz had been on the committee representing VWWC and the Local Wood Action Team*)
 - Joe Short, Northern Forest Center
 - Tim Tierney, Vermont Agency of Commerce and Community Development
 - Allan Thompson, Consulting Forester/president, Vermont Woodlands Association Board
- Members of the Steering Committee and the WLEB Forestry Committee form a Summit Planning Committee to provide input on the 2nd annual Summit agenda. The event is held at Burke Mountain Resort, attracting 149 attendees.

- FPR requests VSJF's assistance in helping the LEAP program better position itself to execute new trainings for the department and improve its overall management; VSJF begins attending LEAP board meetings, discusses ways to help them reinvigorate their board and develop a new strategic plan.
- The Network sponsors the 1st Forestry Hack-a-thon at Do North Co-Working in Lyndonville.

Value Chain Development

- The Network, partnering with the WLEB Forestry Committee, hosts a meetup in Hardwick to explore biochar as a potential growth market, attracting 53 attendees.
- Post-Summit, VSJF meets with ACCD economist Ken Jones about doing a data review of the For Maine forest sector analysis to identify potential emerging forest products and services that could be aligned with Vermont's manufacturing scale. Ken puts together a draft outline of work. The Steering Committee provides feedback in late 2019, but by March of 2020 ACCD is in an all-hands on deck mode with COVID-19 response, so the project is sidelined.
- VSJF assists VTC and partners in developing an NBRC grant application for a workforce development project to address the need for more entry-level loggers.
 - Mass Timber Action Team
 - The Network hosts a meetup with the Vermont Green Building Network in Burlington to educate architects, engineers and others about the potential of mass timber in New England. It attracts 62 attendees. One attendee, Adam Kane from the Fairbanks Museum, is introduced to Ricky McLain at WoodWorks (mass timber action team lead), and Ricky is able to provide technical support for the museum's effort to design a building addition out of mass timber.
 - Local Wood Action Team
 - Efforts continue to encourage use of the Vermont Wood Forum, but ultimately, the tool is not adopted.
 - The action team meets with partners in NH and ME to help develop a regional proposal to create a similar tool to be shared by trade organizations throughout northern New England, but that project is not funded.
 - VSJF retains Ghost Writers to organize the Vermont Wood Tour on behalf of the Network and the Vermont Wood Works Council; however, the tour is canceled due to lack of registrations.

Communications Strategy

Execution of the industry level communications strategy continues, publishing 8 additional stories.

WLEB Forestry Committee Meet Up, hosted by Vermont Farmers Food Center (VFFC)

Overview and tour of VFFC with Greg Cox, Board President

- Grassroots movement to build agricultural economic development center in Rutland
- Opened November 2012 – 2.93 acre site with four buildings
- Hosts year-round farmers' market; aggregates and delivers food to Rutland City Schools; runs Farmacy program and supports emerging farmers, among other programs:
<http://www.vermontfarmersfoodcenter.org/>

Forestry/Wood Products Promotion via Vermont Farmers Food Center (VFFC) discussion:

- VFFC facility would be excellent venue for promoting forest and wood products
- Idea to host a wood product/forestry event with educators and businesses to help attract young people to the industry; attendees could include:
 - Yestermorrow
 - VT Woodworking School
 - Stafford Forestry Department
 - Sustainable Forestry Initiative – oversees Project Learning Tree
 - Paul Smith's College
 - Sawmills – bring equipment to show
 - Woodworkers
 - Vermont School Tech centers
- Local Wood Steering Committee will be engaged for planning
- Could be announced/promoted at 2020 Forest Industry Summit
- Could include a walk in the woods; tasting of Agri-forestry products in VFFC kitchen (nuts, maple, mushrooms)

2020

WLEB funds VSJF \$70,000 to continue Vermont Forest Products Value Chain Investment Strategy

Network Development

- Plans were underway for a 3rd annual Vermont Forest Industry Network and were being coordinated with the New England Lumberman's Association (NELA) annual conference that was to be held the day before at Burke. Both events were canceled due to COVID-19.
- Christine McGowan is invited to join the board of the Vermont Green Building Network; later in the year the board hosts a webinar, organized in partnership with VFIN, around sourcing local wood from Vermont producers. The event attracts 40+ participants.
- Due to challenges arising in the Forest Industry from COVID closures, FPR asks VSJF to convene the relevant service providers (VSJF, VHCB, UVM Extension, FPR, VWWC, NFC) who then meet weekly beginning in April. Phone calls are made to forest industry businesses to check in on their needs. These meetings serve to help coordinate efforts among service providers assisting the industry.
- Given the uncertainties posed by COVID-19, VSJF scales back Network activity; at the same time ACCD announces it will be creating a COVID Recovery project and solicits service providers; VSJF develops a funding proposal with partners NFC and VWWC, with participation by VHCB and UVM, that focuses on providing direct business and marketing assistance to woodworking companies.
- The Network sponsors the 2nd (virtual) Forestry Hack-a-thon with Do North Co-Working, which leads to a discussion about helping them develop a business plan for a Forestry Accelerator, in advance of them submitting a formal proposal to NBRC for funding. VSJF receives a new NBRC grant for 2020 – 2022, which includes funds to assist Do North in creating the accelerator business plan.
- The Steering Committee agrees to postpone the next Vermont Forest Industry Summit until 2022. A tentative June 2022 date is on hold.
- VSJF assists LEAP in applying for a WLEB service provider grant to help them re- build their website and revamp their curricula and marketing materials. LEAP receives funding in Spring 2020 and work begins on the project. The board decides to recruit newboard members before scheduling a strategic planning session.
- The Network provides a letter of support to Northern Vermont University and Do North Co-Working in their NBRC grant proposal to create a Forestry Economy Business Accelerator. Their grant is awarded, and work proceeds on the business plan.
- VSJF is approached by VFPA to assist them in developing a member survey and helping them with a strategic planning process to address declining membership.

Value Chain Development

- Mass Timber Action Team
 - Plans were underway for a tour of mass timber and related supply chain businesses in VT, NH and MA in May, organized by the Mass Timber Action Team. The event, which had about 15 registrations by April, was canceled due to COVID-19.

- The Network provides a letter of support to the Fairbanks Museum’s NBRC grant application to build a mass timber demonstration project for its expansion project. The grant is awarded.
 - The team continued meeting via Zoom and began making plans for a series of webinars to highlight successful mass timber projects in the region; the group decided to postpone the series until 2021 due to a lot of competition for webinars in the fall.
- Plans begin to convene stakeholders to discuss forest economy workforce issues; due to COVID, plans for this convening are put on hold. Meanwhile, the Network receives WLEB and HMF grants that include funding to create a Forest Economy Career Pathways guide modeled after a similar Farm to Plate food systems career guide. VSJF hires an intern to conduct research over the summer, and into the fall.

Communications Strategy

- After a brief pause, the communications strategy resumes, with stories related to how businesses in the sector are managing through COVID, publishing 10 additional stories in 2020;
- In lieu of any in-person events, the Network launches a newsletter to try to keep people connected and share COVID recovery and other resources with the industry. The email goes to 772 subscribers.
- As of February 2021, we published a total of 34 profile stories and two op-eds since January 2017. In total, the stories have:
 - Been read by nearly 17,600 people on the VSJF website
 - Gained more than 1.9 million media impressions in Vermont and regional press, including:
 - Vermont Business Magazine
 - Rutland Herald
 - Caledonian Record
 - Orange County Observer
 - Northern Logger Magazine
 - St. J Today
 - Brattleboro Reformer
 - Vermont Digger, and more
 - Reached more than 453,500 people on social media
 - Have been liked, shared and commented on more than 5,300 times

COVID-19 Response

- VSJF and partners VWWC and NFC are awarded a COVID Technical Assistance Recovery Grant to help woodworking businesses that were forced to close during the shutdown and/or had to pivot to online sales due to the sudden drop in tourism. 24 woodworking businesses received assistance through the grant.

Other Business Development

- Facilitate consulting services for a firewood processor looking to expand (2020-2021)

- Facilitate consulting services for two Vermont sawmills (2020-2021)

2021

Network Development

- Work continues to develop a business plan for the Do North Co-Working Forestry Accelerator, with a goal to complete the business plan in Spring 2021, so the accelerator can launch within the next year.
- Christine assists a VFPA survey committee with developing a survey for members and non-members that launched in February, and she will assist them in compiling and analyzing results in anticipation of a board retreat in the summer.
- Work continues to assist LEAP stay on track with its WLEB grant, and now that the board has some new members, we intend to help them apply for a VCF strategic planning grant in anticipation of a retreat sometime in 2021.
- The Network Steering Committee will have a retreat in March to discuss the future of the Network and its activities.

Value Chain Development

- The mass timber action team plans for a webinar series to highlight successful mass timber projects in the region.
- Work continues to refine the draft Career Pathways Guide, with a goal of completing the guide by Spring 2021 and beginning outreach to Vermont schools in summer/fall 2021.

Communications Strategy

- Work continues to produce industry stories at least through June 2021; with potential to include a podcast as part of the future strategy

Other Vermont Forest Industry Network Industry Connections

- VSJF represents VFIN on the Maine Mass Timber Commercialization Center's mass timber team
- Christine represents VFIN as a member of the Vermont Green Building Network
- Christine serves as an advisor to the board of the Vermont Wood Works Council
- Christine serves as an informal advisor to the board of the Vermont Forest Products Association
- Christine serves as an informal advisor to the board of Logger Education and Professionalism (LEAP)
- Christine represents VFIN on the board of the Northern Vermont Economic Development District (NVEDD)

Funding for this program housed at the VSJF has come from a combination of grants and contracts, namely: US EDA, Northern Border Regional Commission, Working Lands Enterprise Fund, High Meadows Fund, and VSJF's annual grant from the VT Agency of Commerce & Community Development.