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BENNINGTON -- As lawmakers return to Montpelier for the second year of the legislative biennium, a coalition of advocates is hoping they will consider legislation aimed at enhancing Vermont's working landscape.

The Vermont Council on Rural Development is working with the Vermont Land Trust, Vermont Natural Resources Council and others to craft and promote the Working Lands Enterprise Investment Bill, said Executive Director Paul Costello. The bill aims to boost agriculture and small businesses while preserving Vermont's traditional rural economy.

The bill was crafted after detailed analysis of the state's priorities, Costello said.

"Vermonters identify with the landscape, with the sense of active, working lands. Vermonters don't want to see the state become a park land for the well-to-do. They believe that the character of the state is embedded in the rural economy of farm and forest and the success of those industries," Costello said.

"We lead in organics per capita. We're the national leader in the number of organic farms, farmers markets, direct sales to consumers and CSA development," he added. "It's not the whole of agriculture, by any means, but it gives us the right to say we're the national leader in this food systems movement right now, and we believe that we can raise that flag and reach out to attract a new generation of young people who are interested in coming to Vermont."

The bill, as introduced in the Senate, would create the Vermont Working Lands Enterprise Fund that would provide grants to small start-up businesses. It would also ensure that businesses receive "wrap-around services," which would connect qualifying businesses with various state agencies to launch and grow.

"It's not just hippie, small businesses. It's also the next Ben and Jerry's, the next Cabot. How do we wrap services together to help businesses grow through the different challenges they have?" Costello said.

He and others believe an initial investment of \$3 million from the state would launch the program. The long-term goal is for the state to invest \$15 million annually in the program.

"This is obviously a big, comprehensive platform. It's going to be challenging. It also is going to cost money. It's not free," Costello said.

A new Vermont Working Lands Enterprise Board would also be created. The 13-member board would unify the agencies and groups that help agricultural businesses start and succeed, Costello said.

Similarly, a new Office of Planning Coordination, and a state planning director, would be created.

A new working lands designation would allow municipalities to create working lands enterprise areas in their town plans. Costello said lands with that designation would be eligible for a reduction in the state capital gains tax. Farmers who sell equipment or cattle would benefit, he said. Landowners could also receive a reduction in the estate tax under that designation, he said.

The new efforts to boost the working landscape will be the focus of a major marketing campaign that is also included in the legislation. Costello said the campaign will focus on agriculture and forest-product businesses already in Vermont and seek new entrepreneurs to the state.

"It's neither left nor right, from our point of view. It's just good economics. So, we're looking at building a campaign," he said.

So far, lawmakers and members of the Shumlin administration have been positive about the bill, said Amy Shollenberger, a registered lobbyist and consultant working on promoting the bill.

"The initial reaction is generally positive. We've started talking to a few people, both in the administration and legislators. The first reaction is, 'It's about time we do something like this. It's really necessary,'" she said. "When you get to the money conversation, you get the general reaction any time you're talking about money. We know that's a big ask, but it's an important component because the whole point of it is if the state's not investing in this, the result is going to be that our landscape is going to change."

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