



## **Working With Vermont Farmers To Improve Water Quality And Support Sustainable Agriculture**

*By Marli Rupe, DEC Agricultural Water Quality Specialist*

What do farms, water quality and the Agency of Natural Resources have in common? One might not expect to find a farm inspector hidden within the Agency of Natural Resources; however since May 2012 the Department of Environmental Conservation's (DEC) Stormwater Program has included an Agricultural Water Quality Specialist. The role of this position is to enforce water quality

regulations on farms, as well as to increase collaboration and partnerships among sister agencies, federal partners and the broader agricultural community. The VT Agency of Agriculture is appropriately seen as the lead in agricultural education and enforcement, however the VT DEC provides a key role in that effort as the entity designated by the Environmental Protection Agency to be the National Pollutant Discharge Elimination System (NPDES) permitting authority in VT for the federal Clean Water Act. Those who are familiar with NPDES permits for stormwater may not realize that the program also covers farms, using yet another acronym: CAFO.

Concentrated Animal Feeding Operations (CAFOs) are farms that fit specific statutory criteria based on size or discharge. Within its Stormwater Program, DEC has developed a draft general permit for CAFOs that discharge, and will be prepared to implement CAFO permits within a few weeks. CAFO permits function differently than many other ANR permits but as with all our work, the primary goal is to improve water quality.

Fortunately the best way to investigate discharges and water quality concerns is by getting out in the field, and this spring's weather has made that a pleasure. DEC has an agreement with the U.S. EPA to inspect a minimum of 12 farms per year, but the number is likely to be much higher thanks to the strong partnership that has developed between ANR and the VT Agency of Agriculture over the past few years. Staffs from both agencies coordinate regularly with individual farmers to visit sites, investigate concerns, and find practical solutions to water quality problems. Farm visits include a detailed review of the farm's production area where the potential may exist for nutrient runoff, as well as consultations with farm managers that cover field practices, buffers, tillage practices and other conservation efforts that can decrease a farm's impact on surface water quality. Fortunately, many farms are excellent stewards of the land and in many cases are proactively trying newer technologies such as drag hoses, manure injection and no-till planting. Where problems are found, the agencies work together to determine the best plan for addressing any violations, helping each other support joint goals of clean water and sustainable agriculture.

The two agencies and their respective leaders have also fostered a partnership that encourages on-farm remediation and big-picture planning and visioning. This visioning is focused on short-term farm practices that can help with pollution prevention as well as long-term solutions to larger problems that may require policy discussions. A venue for these has been the joint agency Ag Workgroup (AWG) that formed last winter. As part of the Act 138 public outreach, more than 20 meetings with farmers last fall generated a long list of ideas that agency staff realized needed further consideration in a workgroup setting with key partners and producers.

The AWG is comprised mostly of farmers as well as technical advisors who work directly with farmers. The group met 7 times during the winter, developed recommendations on agricultural practices and policies, and will continue to meet during the summer and into the fall. (For meeting minutes and to see the group's interim report, check out the Lake Champlain Phosphorus Initiative page at [www.emcenter.org](http://www.emcenter.org)).

Information about DEC's new CAFO permit is on our website (<http://www.watershedmanagement.vt.gov/stormwater/htm/agriculture.htm>). The program is administered by Marli Rupe, Ag Water Quality Specialist.