



**OFFICE OF THE LIEUTENANT GOVERNOR**

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**\*\*\*PRESS RELEASE\*\*\***

**Lt. Governor Molly Gray Kicks-Off Earth Week with “Seat at the Table” on Climate Change and Sustainable Food Systems**

Montpelier, Vt. — This afternoon, Lt. Governor Gray hosted her fifth “Seat at the Table” on the issue of climate change and sustainable food systems. Kicking-off Earth Week 2021, the “Seat at the Table” explored the role of sustainable and just food systems in addressing climate change.

The panel followed on the heels of a [VTDigger story](#) Sunday on a drought facing Vermont and a historically dry month of March, as well as [VPR story](#) Monday on the increased sale of “raw land” for development in central Vermont since the start of the pandemic, specifically farm and forest land.

“With the start of the Vermont growing season and with many lessons learned about food insecurity and land sales from this pandemic, we have an opportunity to listen to farmers and food producers and to increase our support for their efforts,” Gray said, “Today’s speakers highlighted the need for public investments in just and sustainable food systems, as well as social services for farming families, in order to recover stronger from COVID-19 and build a climate resilient Vermont.”

Speakers included Graham Unangst-Rufenacht, Policy Director of Rural Vermont, Meredith T. Niles, PhD, Assistant Professor of the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences at the University of Vermont, Grace Oedel, the Executive Director of Northeast Organic Farming Association of Vermont (NOFA-VT), and Taylor & Jake Mendell, Owners of Footprint Farm in Starksboro, Vermont. Lt. Governor Gray moderated the event.

Panelists discussed the need to strengthen local supply chains and equitable access to agriculture and resources. Furthermore, panelists discussed lessons learned from the pandemic, particularly concerning food insecurity and the role growers and food producers play in protecting the land and environment. All members of the panel touched on the systemic inequities for marginalized communities within the food system landscape, particularly as it concerns land access for BIPOC Vermonters and social services like healthcare and childcare for farming families.

Grace Oedel, of NOFA-VT said, “I so appreciate the opportunity to think collectively about how we might use this moment of disruption to shift towards a more holistic, resilient, and just food and farming system. Social and environmental justice meet at the nexus of food and farming. In taking seriously how we feed our community and care for our planet, and by centering the voices of the farmers and farm workers on the front lines of this critical work, Vermont strengthens our local economies, supports our working landscape, and ensures a thriving VT for the next generation.”

Graham Unangst-Rufenacht of Rural Vermont noted, "In taking on such a broad topic, it was affirming to hear a shared analysis from all of the panelists today. In particular, that climate change, its impacts, and a more viable and equitable agriculture must not be approached in a reductionist framework centering carbon, GHG emissions, and markets - rather it must be approached holistically, centering the basic needs of all of our community members (publicly funded universal healthcare, childcare, cost share programs to support local food purchasing, access to land and housing, fair labor conditions, just livelihoods, etc.) and all aspects of our planetary ecological crises (biodiversity loss, water quality and access, soil health, and more)."

Taylor Mendell, of Footprint Farm added, “We see small-scale, regenerative agriculture as playing an important role in guiding us all toward a more sustainable future. We are proud to be part of a growing number of young people in agriculture, learning from the wealth of generational information that exists in Vermont, as well as benefiting from connection to a national community of young farmers through today's use of social media and online tools.” She continued on to say, “While we have been fortunate to have been able to start our own farm and create a career in agriculture, to capitalize on the renewed excitement around agriculture and create a solid foundation for our future local food system, we need to reduce barriers to farming for both young and BIPOC farmers.”

Meredith Niles, of the University of Vermont cited that, “Systems problems require systems solutions...20% of farmers themselves were classified as food insecure during Covid-19. People still need help now while we plan for a more resilient future.”

A recording of the event is available to view on YouTube here:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V4NynxiPdTk>

Vermonters wishing to attend future sessions, can register, and find additional information here: <https://ltgov.vermont.gov/seatatthetable>

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