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# Vermont Farms Fret Over New Sanctions For Water Pollution

By [PETER HIRSCHFELD](#) · 19 HOURS AGO



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**In order for Vermont to successfully implement a phosphorous-reduction plan to improve the state's water quality, farmers need need a helping hand, not a punishing hammer, says Bill Moore, legislative director for the Vermont Farm Bureau.**

Environmentalists are giving Gov. Peter Shumlin early accolades for his proposal to [reduce the amount of phosphorus running into Lake Champlain](#). But a prominent agriculture group says the plan to clean up the lake might end up hurting the farms that operate near it.

For years, water quality advocates have criticized the Shumlin administration for failing to crack down on heavily polluting farms. Large farms operating along Lake Champlain's tributaries are among the chief sources of high phosphorus loads. And the toxic blue-green algae blooms fueled by that farm runoff have begun to exact an ecological toll on the big lake, and harm the businesses that rely on it.

“These places are not a canary in a coal mine, they’re collapsed coal mines,” says Chris Kilian, head of the Conservation Law Foundation of Vermont. “They are a problem that demands immediate action.”

Kilian has been a vocal critic of the Shumlin administration, saying the Democratic governor has [failed to hold farms to account](#) for their role in the state’s water quality problem. But Kilian says the governor's proposal to impose new tax penalties on high-polluting farms reveals a newfound willingness to crack down.

**"It will be a significant change if access to and participation in the Current Use program for farms includes some teeth." - Chris Kilian, Conservation Law Foundation of Vermont**

“It will be a significant change if access to and participation in the Current Use program for farms includes some teeth, and that there’s some ability if folks are consistently violating the law ... to move farms out of that program,” Kilian says.

The Current Use program, in place since the late 1970s, ensures significantly lower tax bills for people whose land is in agriculture or forest land. Shumlin says if problem farms don’t clean up their act, they should get booted from Current Use. Kilian says it’s a common-sense approach that will likely force real changes in farm practices.

“Having a reasonable expectation that the tax benefits associated with Current Use should carry with them basic aspects of stewardship seems really simple and reasonable to me,” Kilian says.

But Bill Moore, legislative director for the Vermont Farm Bureau, says farmers want to be willing participants in the clean-up program. And Moore says they need a helping hand, not a punishing hammer.

“The Agency [of Agriculture] already has more than enough regulatory tools, and real regulatory tools – real hammers, real carrots and real sticks to help farmers do what they want to do right, which is be stewards of the land, and stewards of the water quality,” Moore says. “But there’s no funding.”

**"The Agency [of Agriculture] already has more than enough regulatory tools ... to help farmers do what they want to do right, which is be stewards of the land, and stewards of the water quality. But there's no funding." - Bill Moore, legislative director for the Vermont Farm Bureau**

Shumlin’s Lake Champlain clean-up plan includes more than \$10 million in new funding. But Moore says only a fraction of the money goes to help the

farming community with phosphorus-mitigation projects. And he says there's little help available to farmers looking to be better stewards of their land.

"There's no agriculture staff to get out there and work with them and help them comply with the regulations that exist," Moore says.

And Moore says Current Use shouldn't be viewed as a government subsidy to be taken away, but as a public policy that ensures fair property tax rates for the farmers that preserve Vermont's bucolic image.

"Cows don't have kids, they don't drive cars," Moore says. "Farms create very little demand on essential services. And yet without Current Use, they would be paying a property tax that reflects something they don't have."

The Shumlin administration hasn't yet said what kinds of environmental

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