

October 20, 2022

To VT Senators Sanders and Leahy, Congressman Welch, and USDA Leadership:

I write today from my Conservation District office in White River Junction, Vermont, at the conclusion of the 2022 Gathering for Open Agricultural Technology (G.O.A.T.), to encourage you to develop and adopt standards for a common data management system and an open source methodology for the 70 recipients of the \$2.8 billion Climate Smart Commodities grants.

As a Conservation District manager, I work with dozens of farms in a coordinated [Farm Team](#) approach, to develop and implement Conservation Plans and help farms access technical and financial assistance (TA and FA) from private, state, and federal programs. Currently, my staff uses 7 different tools and databases to upload farmer data, such as soil type, crop type, soil and manure test results, slope, field boundaries, and management decisions, often for the same farm. In effect, we are paid multiple times to do the same job, when our time would be better spent in the field providing direct TA to farms, and the government's money would be better spent in direct FA to farmers. We are extremely frustrated by the lack of coordination across these existing tools, and fear that unless the USDA requires interoperability of new and existing tools, the result will be increased burdens on farmers and inefficiencies in federally funded conservation programming.

I implore you to consider mandating that technology developed under the Climate Smart Commodity grants be compatible with an open source, common data entry system such as FarmOS and collaboratively developed open standards such as the Data Food Consortium. This assures that the solutions intended by this grant will fit into a network of interoperable systems and the money will not be wasted across dozens of incompatible platforms, and continue to cause frustration and inefficiencies for farmers. Our current conservation delivery system is hindered by difficult and inefficient tools, lack of funding for Conservation District and field level NRCS staff, and program policies that are not iterative or informed by on-the-ground expertise. This grant is an opportunity to implement a modern, open source system that cultivates innovation and reduces redundancies.

While I have your ear, I must also point out that financially supporting our existing locally-led conservation infrastructure would be a more sustainable, cost-effective investment in the American food system. In order to build the resiliency, efficiency, and effectiveness of our democratically organized, locally-led conservation delivery system, please fund Conservation Districts to help them fulfill their unfunded community engagement mandates, and direct attention toward improving the efficiency and accessibility of the Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP) for diversified farming types. Also, please consider instructing the 70 grant recipients to work directly with Conservation Districts, which have held long-term relationships with farmers and land stewards for over 80 years. Please do reach out if you or your staff are interested in participating in a collaborative conversation on these issues and ideas in the future.

Sincerely,

Jennifer M. Byrne

Director, White River Natural Resources Conservation District

28 Farmvu Drive, White River Junction, VT 05001

802-369-3167 · whiterivernrcd@gmail.com

www.whiterivernrcd.org

Witnesses:

- Ankita Raturi, Assistant Professor, Director of Agricultural Informatics Lab, Purdue University
- Caroline Gordon, Legislative Director, Rural Vermont
- Cory Ross, Windham County NRCD, Vermont
- Genna Fudin, OpenTEAM Fellow
- Greg Austic, Our Sci LLC
- Juliet Norton, Agricultural Informatics Research Scholar, Purdue University
- Kyler Laird, Farmer, Rensselaer, Indiana
- Laurie Wayne, Project Director, Open Food Network USA (a 501c3 Nonprofit)
- Marcus Estes, CEO, Chroma Signet
- Michael Stenta, farmOS
- Ned Horning (Middlebury VT), Regen Development Network, Inc
- Sam Mayne, Essex County NRCD, Vermont
- Sarah Damsell, Orleans County NRCD, Vermont

What is Open Source? Open source software is software that is distributed with its source code, making it available for use, modification, and distribution with its original rights.

What is GOAT? The Gathering for Open Agricultural Technology is an open community of stakeholders who are committed to coordinating existing development, inviting new development, aligning technology and actual users, and creating a roadmap for open agricultural technology. The GOAT community asserts, “the technologies that produce our food and the data about our food system should be public, and enable control by the farms and farmers that produce it. Together, we can collectively address the problems which prevent the creation of advanced, high quality open technology and its adoption.” <http://goatech.org/>

What is a Conservation District?

Conservation Districts were established across the U.S. in the late 1930s as democratically organized subdivisions of state government to lead conservation planning efforts on the local level. Conservation Districts chair their Local Work Groups, a community engagement mechanism which provides locally-led input into natural resource decision making, guiding USDA funding priorities and policy development. Learn more about [Local Work Group directives here.](#)

What is OpenTEAM?

OpenTEAM (Technology Ecosystem for Agricultural Management) serves as a farmer-driven, collaborative community of farmers, ranchers, scientists, researchers, engineers, farm service providers, and food companies who are committed to improving soil health and advancing agriculture’s ability to become a solution to climate change through the co-development of an interoperable suite of tools.

