Can We "Trust Uncle Sam"? Vermont and the Submarginal Lands Project, 1934–1936

The interactions of Vermont with the federal resettlement program between 1934 and 1936 suggest the gradual evolution of resistance to the land and agricultural policies of the New Deal during the mid-thirties.

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The Great Depression struck at the heart of the image of prosperity and independence that had characterized the interaction of Americans with their government during the 1920s. When Franklin D. Roosevelt took office in 1932, he promised to restore the nation to its former glory, assuring the people that "This great nation will endure as it has endured, will revive and will prosper," in spite of the current economic crises facing the United States.[1] Roosevelt had already alluded to his plans for the New Deal in his acceptance speech at the Democratic convention, in which he stressed the importance of issues that would be relevant to Vermonters, including reforestation, regional planning, public power development, and government regulation of utilities.[2]

Among the many programs eventually initiated by the Roosevelt administration was a proposal for the resettlement of poor farmers living on lands classified as "submarginal," and the subsequent conversion of these lands to the public domain. In the spring of 1934, federal administrators traveled to Vermont to educate the legislature on the program, and to scout out land in the Green Mountains for purchase and rehabilitation. The ensuing controversy over the future of Vermont's hill town communities provoked intense debate within the state and is illustrative of emerging hostility to the expansion of federal power. Moreover, the

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submarginal lands debate framed the argument for Vermont's — and politician George Aiken's — opposition to any encroachment by the federal government on the rights of Vermont.[3]

Vermont and the New Deal

The interactions of Vermont policymakers with the federal submarginal lands project between 1934 and 1936 suggest the gradual evolution of resistance to the New Deal during the mid-thirties. Like other Americans, Vermonters suffered during the Great Depression and by March 1933, when Roosevelt took office, they were eager to get a share of the benefits of federal assistance. Newspapers encouraged the state to apply for its "fair share" of relief and development money, and early in the administration several important projects were applied to the state.[4] Under the auspices of the New Deal, Vermonters received support from the government through several of the alphabet agencies that did so much to change the geographic and social landscape of the nation. Yet as planning for various New Deal programs evolved, Vermonters began to recognize the potential implications of an expanded federal presence in the state, and wariness emerged alongside the initial interest in federal money. Though scholars have duly noted the state's hesitations about various federal programs, the negotiations over submarginal lands demonstrate the willingness of many Vermonters to consider some federal-state cooperation during the early years of the New Deal. In the end, several proposals for Vermont, such as resettlement and the Green Mountain Parkway, were rejected by the state, while others, more in harmony with a preexisting ethic of conservation and aid, were successful and brought both jobs and money to the state.

Legend has it that residents of the hills of Vermont were slow to notice the Depression during the early 1930s: These already-depressed towns initially suffered little from the widespread food shortages and industrial failures.[5] In fact, the subsistence farming that was common in many hill towns was touted by some Vermonters as a long-range solution to the economic troubles of the Depression and as evidence of the security of so-called submarginal farms. Yet even when progressive economists and planners appreciated the self-sufficiency made possible by this subsistence economy, they sought to improve upon it through the introduction of new methods and technologies as well as proposals to move farm families onto better land. The scholars who studied conditions on these farms suggested that the people of the hill towns were suffering considerably from the Depression, as prices for agricultural products fell and relief agencies became increasingly overextended.[6]

One of the redevelopment projects proposed for Vermont advocated

Farm scene near Hardwick, ca. 1935. Works Projects Administration photograph, negative number GU-607. Vermont hill farmers struggled against an oftentimes inhospitable soil; an age-old way of life for farm families but a wasted effort from the perspective of agricultural economists and federal planners. These conflicting perspectives fed the debate over the conversion of land from farms to forest in the mountains of Vermont. Collections of the Vermont Historical Society.

the purchase of submarginal farmland in depressed areas and its conversion to recreational and timber culture uses, coordinated initially by the Agricultural Adjustment Administration (AAA) and the Federal Emergency Relief Administration (FERA) and after 1935 by the Resettlement Administration (RA). Although ultimately the plans for a Vermont "farm to forest" project were not carried out, the statewide controversy over the submarginal lands purchase program highlights the predicament of a small, independent-minded state during this period of extensive federal expansion into the domain of state and local control.

Through the correspondence between Vermonters and federal relief administrators we witness how the conflict between state and federal officials played out incrementally, culminating in the spring of 1936 with federal refusal to accept the stringent conditions insisted upon by the state of Vermont. States-righters counted the failed negotiations as a victory for local control, though other observers believed that Vermont had lost out as its poor farmers were denied the option of a subsidized move to better land, and the state simultaneously missed an opportunity to add thousands of acres of public land to its state parks and forests.[7]

Land Use and Conservation in the 1920s

Conservation of the nation's natural resources and related issues ranging from soil depletion to flood control became increasingly important during the first decades of the twentieth century. In this context, the continued use of submarginal lands for agriculture and its ecological consequences played a significant role in attracting the government's attention to struggling farmers. A 1928 study of farm relief, commissioned by the National Democratic Committee, argued that such farming "constitutes a drain on our national well-being to the degree that the acquisition of such lands by the public is warranted."[8] This report, which as a policy statement presaged much of the agenda of the RA and other resettlement agencies, demonstrated the longstanding nature of economic and social problems in submarginal areas and proposed "the extensive purchase of such submarginal lands as are suitable for forestation." Depressed agricultural land prices meant that these areas were "available for purchase at comparatively low figures," while "the funds obtained by the owners would enable them to buy farms in the better regions."[9]

Any repurchasing program, moreover, would also further the national conservation agenda and improve the agricultural situation of many mountainous areas, "preserv[ing] the soils of many hillsides that are now washing down into the rivers and which frequently cover the more fertile valley lands with worthless and destructive gravel." This study articulated the widespread concern that farmers would continue to try and wrest a living from these poor farms, thus wasting effort and resources on a "project doomed to failure." Even before the onset of the Great Depression in 1929, retiring submarginal land from production was seen as one means of promoting more efficient land use, conserving fertility, contributing to the reduction of crop surpluses, and raising the social and economic standards of historically depressed agricultural areas.[10]

In the early thirties, some estimates suggested that close to 100 million acres nationwide were submarginal, and the deteriorating condition of these lands was eventually the impetus for New Deal legislation that created several rural relief agencies. Later in the decade, as analysis of agricultural problems matured, New Deal bureaucrats came to believe that chronic rural poverty was a consequence of the unwise use of agricultural resources, including farming in submarginal areas. One FERA report suggested that the "rural slums" created by this problem were characterized by conditions similar to those in urban areas, where the "deleterious effects of poverty, disease, and ignorance impose their handicap upon the surrounding community." The federal government sought to counteract this trend toward rural decline with land use modifications and educational programs as well as through large-scale resettlement programs. The adaptation of improvement programs to rural areas was a part of the mission of the three agencies that worked to reform impoverished Vermont agricultural areas during the New Deal.[11]

The Economics of Vermont Hill Towns

In *Time and Change in Vermont,* Vermont geographer Harold Meeks attributes the decline of agriculture in the hill towns to the gradual transition from sheep husbandry to dairy farming. While even the poorest land was capable of supporting a flock of sheep, many mountain farms, even when fully exploited, were unable to furnish the feed or pastureland to support even a small commercial dairy herd. As part of the struggle to keep family farms viable, the "marginal uplands were kept in production far longer than they probably should have been, contributing to a large number of poverty-level farmers with a few cows trying to eke out an existence from meager land resources."[12] Many other discouraged farmers had already left mountain communities during the early decades of the twentieth century. The challenges of keeping a hill farm with poor soil in production were daunting for even the most stalwart and experienced farmer, and agricultural economists increasingly suggested that there were better uses for the land than struggling farms.

Within Vermont, concern had been voiced about rural depopulation for decades, but the late 1920s brought a resurgence of interest in the future of Vermont hill farms. While some observers worried about the expense of maintaining town governments in both poor and underpopulated areas, others increasingly focused on the recreational and summer home potential of Vermont's hill towns, as evidenced by the annual publication of guides like Dorothy Canfield's *Vermont Summer Homes*.[13] Attention was increasingly being paid to the future of Vermont's mountainous rural areas.

Submarginal lands and the fate of farms located on them first received official attention in Bulletin 357, "Land Utilization as a Basis of Rural Organization," published by the Vermont Agricultural Experiment Station in June 1933. This study, based on data from 1929 — before the culmination of the economic slowdowns of the Depression — examined conditions in thirteen hill towns and evaluated problems associated with farm abandonment and unprofitable land in the mountains of Vermont. The towns in the study were described as "essentially similar" in topography and soils to another seventy-four towns in the state, all of which suffered from depopulation and economic stagnation during the decades prior to the Depression. These eighty-seven towns encompassed 35.3 percent of the land area of the state, and their uncertain fate was increasingly a source of concern for Vermont boosters and economists alike. In recognition of the regional importance of the hill town problem, this publication encouraged both the state and federal governments to direct funding and planning toward the improvement of land use and population distribution in these towns.[14]

The acreage in forest and woodland in mountainous parts of the state was constantly growing as the number of active farms dropped and hill towns became less economically desirable for development. One of the major concerns of the agricultural economists directing the study was the conservation of the timber resources of these areas, which were 77.2 percent forested in 1929.[15] The authors of Bulletin 357 concluded that the "physical and economic handicaps to farming in the locality apparently made extensive farm abandonment inevitable." One of the troubling consequences of farm abandonment and the inevitable search for maximum profit from the land was that the owners would often "wreck it for timber" by clearing out all decent trees — mature or not — from the woodlot. This stripped the remaining value from the land and eliminated any chance that the timber lands could be feasibly cultivated in the near future.[16] In light of this type of remunerative yet destructive land use, the authors concluded that conversion of abandoned or partially abandoned farmlands to public forests offered the best opportunities for careful management and conservation of the land.[17]

The economic future of the hill towns seemed uncertain, even before the onset of the Depression, and this Agricultural Experiment Station study explored different ways to strengthen local economies and ameliorate conditions in the towns. The authors prescribed a program for the improvement of these areas, suggesting that it was both inevitable and desirable that some people would continue to choose to live in the hill towns. The problems of depopulation and farm abandonment faced by these towns had been moderated slightly over the years by the purchase of summer home properties by out-of-staters, and the authors encouraged this type of "adjustment" to the local economy.[18] They suggested the probability of an eventual need for town and state participation in the management and conversion of these areas. For, "in the last analysis, material improvement in conditions in the hill towns can be achieved only through broad policies." The strategies that the authors endorsed were “directed toward promoting the concentration of population on the better land, the elimination of the excessive costs of schools and roads which are associated with sparse population, and the development of forest and recreational resources.” The object of these associated projects was the “combination of a limited amount of farming with employment in local woodworking industries and with incidental services provided for tourists and summer residents.” By highlighting the major challenges facing Vermont hill towns, Bulletin 357 laid the groundwork for further consideration of the problem of submarginal lands. It also provided material to bolster arguments in favor of resettlement programs that would later emerge among supporters of the conversion of submarginal lands to public management.

The 1931 publication of the findings of the Vermont Commission on Country Life, *Rural Vermont: A Program for the Future,* addressed many of the same issues as Bulletin 357. The Commission recommended that areas where the “scenery is beautiful and the soil is not very productive” should be set aside for recreational use, though this would not necessitate the displacement of “productive farms with a non-agricultural class of residents.”[19] In a 1930 article for the *Journal of Farm Economics,* Henry C. Taylor, the director of the state Commission on Country Life, presented what he saw as a consensus on the status of Vermont hill farms. Taylor observed that “Vermont rural leaders look with satisfaction upon the return of land to forests unless that land is fitted for a type of farming which will support a satisfactory farm life.”[20] As demonstrated by Bulletin 357 and *Rural Vermont: A Program for the Future,* discussions of land use during the early 1930s were dominated by the sense that the state would benefit from the conversion of poor farmland into forest areas. The participation of government in this process had not yet become an important issue.

The Federal “Farm to Forest” Program

Evaluation of the submarginal lands question at the federal and state levels began shortly after economic and planning concerns were first raised in regional and nongovernmental contexts. With Roosevelt’s election and the implementation of New Deal aid programs some of the assistance and relief proposals previously discussed by academics and planners became federal policy. Among the projects introduced in the first round of New Deal legislation, which was meant to immediately soften the impact of the Depression, was the conversion of poor-quality farmland to forest and recreational uses — the farm to forest program. Suddenly at the federal level a response was being formulated to the rural decline that had been obvious in Vermont for years.

When the Rural Rehabilitation Division of the FERA and the Land Policy Section of the AAA publicized their programs for purchasing submarginal farmlands, Vermont farmers and legislators found themselves debating whether the subsistence economies of mountain communities required reform. Some leaders, such as Speaker of the House (1933–1934) and Lieutenant Governor (1935–1936) George Aiken and Speaker of the House Ernest Moore (1935–1936), believed government purchase of private lands to be antithetical to the American principles of self-determination, local autonomy, and states rights.[21] Aiken lived and had been raised in the nominally submarginal town of Putney, and as a nurseryman he bristled at the assumption that the land around his home was valuable only for timber and recreational areas. Other Vermonters, such as author and public intellectual Dorothy Canfield, Commissioner of Agriculture E. H. Jones, and the leaders of the state Grange and Chamber of Commerce, supported the federal government's goal of turning under-productive farms into tree farms and parks. These public figures embraced the idea of preserving a scientifically managed and sustainable timber crop, as well as the quality of agriculture in the state and the soil at high elevations. To them, the significance of these lands lay in how they would best serve the community and the region, rather than how they influenced the lives of individual farmers and landowners.[22]

Under the auspices of the AAA, FERA, and later the RA, the designation of certain mountainous areas as submarginal and the preliminary negotiations for purchase of these lands took place in the legislature during 1934 and 1935. In July 1934, Governor Stanley Wilson appointed a committee to select 20,000 acres for land retirement, in compliance with the guidelines of the Surplus Relief Corporation. This agency, administered by the Land Policy Division of the AAA, aimed to convert poor farmland to alternate purposes in order to reduce agricultural production and the expenses of town governments; adapt lands to their most productive and beneficial uses; and improve the situation of farm families. According to the AAA, this project focused on converting poor farmland further hindered by inconvenient access to markets, thus serving the needs of farmers eager to "better their condition" while simultaneously improving land use. The administrators assured farmers that they would profit from this program that sought to "hasten and render less painful" the process of depopulation while simultaneously furthering the acquisition of land for state parks and forests.[23]

Motivated by the announcement of funding for submarginal lands purchase programs, a group of unnamed officials prepared the "Proposal for the Withdrawal From Cultivation of Poor Farm Lands in Vermont Under the Federal Submarginal Land Acquisition Programme" and presented it to the governor during the summer of 1934.[24] This thirty-page report outlined six areas for purchase, describing the conditions that made these areas eligible for federal Surplus Relief Corporation funds. The authors relied heavily on Bulletin 357, noting that "conditions have grown rapidly worse in these areas since the time of the study in 1929." Parts of ten of the towns studied for Bulletin 357 were included in the proposal, as were sections of thirty-six other towns with similarly marginal conditions.[25] The authors emphasized the benefits that would accrue to the Vermont State Park and Forest system from the federal program, noting that the submarginal areas would complement and expand upon State Forest purchase units. Furthermore, the federal program would permit the acquisition of lands the state had deemed too expensive for purchase because of tenancy or the higher quality of farm woodlots. The authors concluded that virtually all of the farm families could be relocated within their towns, to "well-located, small places and partially-operated well-located farms" outside of the designated purchase units. This would permit most of the towns to retain their population at the same time that less-productive areas were vacated.[26]

According to the proposal, little would be visibly different throughout much of the area in question. Families would be relocated from the poorest and most outlying lands onto better-quality farms; recreational development and a program of timber management would be initiated, though without dramatically changing the character of an area; and the towns would operate more efficiently, with fewer roads and schools to maintain and a more concentrated population.[27] In this scenario, the chances for agricultural success would be improved while local self-determination and personal investments were preserved. In the final enumeration of benefits from this program it was suggested that "society" would benefit from the "economic and social rehabilitation of individual families," with the "consequent strengthening of the entire economic and social organization."[28] The authors of this document demonstrated their interest in concentrating the population and raising the quality of life of Vermont hill towns, while adding recreational and forest land to the state's reserves. They did not raise more specific questions about land transfers and federal control, and it is clear that the state was eager to learn more about how the federal government might contribute to the reorganization and improvement of poor agricultural communities in Vermont.

The next policy document on submarginal lands was the August 1934 "Proposal for the Purchase of Submarginal Lands in Vermont," prepared by the Governor's Commission that had been named in July. The members of this commission were all state officials: E. H. Jones, commissioner of agriculture; James Brown, commissioner of fish and game; J. E. Carrigan, director of the agricultural extension service; and Perry Merrill, commissioner of forestry. This proposal modified the more extensive report discussed above, for the first time raising the issue of local control over the properties and suggesting a long-term, nominal rental of the purchased lands to the state of Vermont. This report forthrightly observed that there were "practically no modern conveniences" in these areas, and suggested that some Vermont families were "struggling helplessly against the effects of vanishing incomes," and were in urgent need of relief. The proposal supported a federal purchase of 20,000 acres of privately owned land, and it outlined both the necessary interagency cooperation and a general budget for the project.[29] With this report, selected officials of the Wilson administration created a policy statement in favor of the submarginal lands project, thus publicizing what they perceived to be the political, economic, and social potential of this program.[30]

A Critique of Federal Intervention Develops

In September 1934, the conflicts associated with submarginal lands began to emerge. The first evidence is Governor Wilson's conciliatory reply to an inquiry from the *Rutland Herald* about the use of funds received from a FERA grant for rural rehabilitation. The *Herald*'s editor had previously referred to the "interesting topic" of rural rehabilitation "about which there seems to be a great deal of misunderstanding." In response, Wilson carefully emphasized the different functions of the rural rehabilitation program, as well as its independence from resettlement projects. The governor emphasized that no money had been received by the state in connection with the submarginal land program and that there was "no assurance that any will be received." He referred to his committee and its study, adding that "a tentative program adapted to Vermont is being considered, but this marginal land program has not proceeded beyond a stage of consideration." Alternately, the FERA grant for rural rehabilitation in question would support the development of relief gardens and fruit and vegetable preservation — less objectionable projects with fewer long-term ramifications than the proposed submarginal lands purchases.[31]

By pledging that no action had been taken on "so-called marginal lands," Wilson sought to reassure both farmers who feared for their farms and opponents of any expansion of federal control within the state. As the New Deal continued to extend its influence nationwide, Vermonters were beginning to consider the implications of extensive federal activity in the state, and local officials started to display caution in their dealings with the federal government. Nevertheless, the project continued to develop, and in September the AAA appointed Perry Merrill as the project manager for the "rehabilitation of rural population stranded on submarginal farms." Merrill, who had served on Wilson's submarginal lands exploratory committee, retained his position as Vermont commissioner of forestry and he was directed to work as a liaison between the two levels of government. The federal government sought the most effective coordination of its politically sensitive project in Vermont, even as the state was beginning to distance itself from the idea.[32]

The submarginal lands question was even more rigorously evaluated during early 1935, as federal officials, following the recommendations of Wilson's commission, developed plans for purchase areas. In the meantime, Governor Charles Smith had taken office in January 1935, and his administration was less receptive than his predecessor's to the submarginal lands purchase program. In part this can be attributed to the executive presence of George Aiken of Putney, the new lieutenant governor, who adamantly opposed the project. Aiken's sense was that "the New Deal . . . and F.D.R. desire[d] to take over the state," and he believed that any alienation of mountain lands from local control would considerably hinder further development in the state, whether in agriculture, summer homes, or some other yet unforeseen type of economic growth.[33]

In the statehouse, consideration of the proposal had become more guarded. In the summer of 1934 the idea of receiving money from the federal government to move poor families off failing farms and onto better lands seemed tempting. Yet by the spring of 1935 the legislature was increasingly discussing leases and mineral rights and individuals were giving voice to second thoughts about their eventual loss of control over federally purchased lands. Similarly, many were opposed in principle to the idea of relinquishing farmlands that had been tilled by families for generations.

Resistance to the purchase program among state officials was subtle. In early 1935, the legislature appointed a board to consider the program and to work with the federal agents, but as Aiken mirthfully related in his *Speaking from Vermont:*

> There was a bit of irony in this legislative action, which made your author chairman of the board. There was a bit of irony in that the legislators knew that he lived on a very submarginal farm. There was a bit more irony in this legislative action in making the Speaker of the House a member of the board, for the legislators knew that the Speaker lived comfortably in an area which was rated as a hundred percent submarginal for twenty miles in all directions from his home.[34]

Of course, Aiken made his living as a nurseryman, not as a farmer, and he was not exclusively dependent upon the land for his family's livelihood. There is no other documentation in the public record of the opinions of Vermont farmers on the submarginal lands question, though at least the town of Chester expressed its interest in having some of the poor and small farms within its boundaries purchased and converted to state forest.[35]

Other Plans for the Vermont Hills

Submarginal lands and resettlement raised questions about local control and state lands that were being asked simultaneously about other federal proposals in Vermont. In February 1935, after two years of discussion, the National Park Service presented the Vermont legislature with a proposal for the Green Mountain Parkway, a roadway running 250 miles along the length of the state. The project sought to provide work relief to unemployed Vermonters and encourage tourists and visitors to travel to the state. The parkway proposal presented issues similar to those surrounding the farm to forest program. By ceding some of the most picturesque land in the state to the federal government, Vermonters would lose any chance to develop it themselves and forfeit their control over land use in this central part of the state. While work relief and federal investment in the state were tempting prospects, the majority of voters chose not to invite federal involvement in parkland development; instead, they opted to maintain a degree of autonomy and self-reliance. Some residents were concerned with finding the most effective way to conserve and protect state lands, while others wondered about "the extent to which Vermonters would let the federal government obtain the control of land within the state." A referendum on the question of developing the Green Mountain Parkway took place on Town Meeting Day in 1936, and both the high turnout of voters and the definitive defeat of the referendum (43,176 to 31,101) demonstrated the deep interest of Vermonters in the development of their state. The outcome also suggests the ambivalence of the people about the merits of federal development projects and their consequences for control over Vermont's land and resources.[36]

The Green Mountain Club, which had managed the areas along the Long Trail since 1910, led the criticism of the Parkway proposal. The GMC's "All Vermont Plan," presented to the legislature five days after the federal highway was introduced, suggested that the state focus its attention on local recreational development, rather than on a roadway that would simply bring people through the state. The slopes of the mountains and hills offered ideal sites for summer homes and recreational areas, uses that would pull tourist money into Vermont more consistently from part-time residents and repeat visitors. Most importantly, the plan "would leave Vermont in the possession and control of its own citizens as no National Park scheme can. It would avoid dividing the state by a large area of Federally controlled and tax-free National Park land." Similarly, supporters of the All Vermont Plan asserted that they abided by and reinforced the independent culture with which Vermont had come to identify, that the proposal encouraged moderate and healthy growth, and that it prevented the exercise of external control on the inner workings of the state.[37]

In its response to the parkway project, the All Vermont Plan also addressed the submarginal land issue: Abandoned and submarginal farms would be "reclaimed" for use by summer visitors who would contribute to the state economy by expanding the town Grand Lists. The corresponding road improvements would increase the usefulness and value of existing hill farms by permitting easier access to markets "without uprooting families from their long-established and well loved homes." The All Vermont Plan presented not only an alternative to the abandonment of Vermont's hill farms and mountain areas to federal control, but also a local answer to New Deal-dominated relief projects.[38]

The "resettlement" of Vermont involved not only summer visitors, according to George Aiken. In his 1938 book *Speaking from Vermont,* he suggested that during the Depression numerous hill farms were purchased and returned to use by urbanites who had fled from the cities and sought to ensure a decent standard of living in rural areas. These people, who had thrown themselves into making a living on their recently acquired farms, were sure to revitalize the towns to which they moved and to further develop their economies — all without either federal or state intervention. Coming from different perspectives, both Aiken and the Green Mountain Club urged keeping Vermont hill farms available for future use by individual landowners.

Yet another challenge to private control over Vermont forest land came in a series of proposals to extend the Green Mountain National Forest beyond the boundaries of the initial tract acquired in 1932. A decade after Vermont passed the enabling act permitting federal purchase of forest land and following thirty years of courting federal money for the development of a national forest in Vermont, the legislature moderated its enthusiastic tone, and limited the Forest Service's power over Vermont woodlands.[39] In March 1935 the legislature passed a bill requiring approval of the acquisition of new forest lands from a state board consisting of many of the same officials who sat on the Submarginal Lands Board.[40] Nevertheless, on May 7, 1935, after evaluating a proposal to approve the purchase of a northern section, this board approved the options on an additional 205,000 acres in Vermont, and the Forest Service continued to place options and purchase lands for the Green Mountain National Forest.[41] Apparently, the language of conservation and the ongoing relationship of the state and the Forest Service inclined the board members toward permitting the continued expansion of the National Forest. Elsewhere, concerns were increasingly being voiced about the alienation of land from local and state control, and other purchases less directly related to conservation would flounder in the legislature over the next year.

Perhaps it was only incidental that later that spring day the Submarginal Lands Board met to discuss the purchase and resettlement program.[42] W. E. Bradder, a former Forest Service employee and the project manager of the Land Policy Section of the AAA, met with the board and attempted to convince them of the benefits to be derived from selling privately held lands to the federal government. He reminded the board that other states had authorized the purchase of submarginal lands, much to their satisfaction; town expenditures in Maine had already been reduced as a consequence. Bradder was addressing an unenthusiastic audience; one board member reported that the consensus in the legislature during the recent session was that they did not "want the Government to own all this land." At this point, the board unanimously agreed that neither the AAA nor FERA could take further options on Vermont farmland until the matter of permanent control over the land was resolved to the satisfaction of state officials. The meeting ended after what must have been a gruff fifteen minutes.[43] Though no public record exists of any other discussions of submarginal lands during the remainder of the summer, the hesitations of the board must have disquieted the otherwise enthusiastic federal officials. A letter sent in August to Governor Smith evidenced their growing concern over the future of the program in Vermont. In this letter, Bradder requested that the governor send the acting director of the Land Utilization Division of the newly created Resettlement Administration a telegram "assuring him of the desire of the people of Vermont for the purchase and development of lands investigated by his Division and the wholehearted cooperation of State Officials in aiding the Project." Though the letter was eventually sent, the support of Vermont's executive for the submarginal lands project was visibly waning.[44]

Consolidation: Of Resettlement and Its Opposition

In April 1935 the activities of the AAA and FERA relating to rural resettlement and submarginal lands were reorganized and consolidated into the Resettlement Administration. The RA's assignment included administering "approved projects involving rural rehabilitation, relief in stricken agricultural areas, and resettlement of destitute or low-income families from rural and urban areas" while at the same time coordinating projects to combat soil erosion and stream pollution, and to facilitate reforestation, flood control, and other necessary protective measures.[45] This relief program in Vermont was stepped up during 1935 as aid workers recognized that some desperate and sparsely settled parts of the state, like many of the "submarginal" areas elsewhere, had received almost no federal aid.

The mission of the RA was explained to farmers through an article in the *Vermont Farm Bureau News* that discussed its activities in the state. "Rehabilitation Gives a Man a Break" described a program that would "give permanent relief to some of the distressed farmers and make them into real national assets," rather than relief cases. The article alerted Vermonters to two important aspects of the Resettlement Administration: the Land Utilization Division and the Rural Resettlement Division. The task of the Land Utilization Division echoed the concern of the authors of Bulletin 357 and *Rural Vermont* with improving the condition of "mostly cut-over timber land a considerable distance from centers of population, on land too poor or too poorly located to earn a living for those who till it." The RA suggested that "there is a profitable use for this land. It may be forestation, reforestation, wild life preservation, recreation, or something that will serve a twofold purpose; that of getting this land into useful production and preventing waste of human effort on land that cannot make profitable returns on the labor expended." Once the Land Utilization Division selected areas for reform, the Rural Resettlement Division offered farmers assistance with voluntary resettlement. The acquiescence of the landowner was crucial, however, and the author asserted: "In no way will there be 'moving' of farm families; simply offers will be made for families 'to move.'" In the event that a farmer opted to remain on his land, and officials agreed that the farm was viable, rehabilitation was offered; the farmer would then have the opportunity to improve his facilities, moderate his debt burden, and receive technical and managerial assistance.[46]

Neither rehabilitation nor resettlement appealed to some Vermont politicians, such as George Aiken, who argued that Vermont farmers were "healthy and well-nourished, comfortably warm and self-supporting — 'statistically bankrupt' . . . but actually solvent."[47] The question for critics of resettlement and the conversion of lands to the public domain was not whether society could be bettered by transfer of ownership, but whether the cherished spirit of independence and self-sufficiency could be maintained after federal intrusion into Vermont hill towns.

Opponents of the RA purchase program continued to argue that in spite of the absence of many “modern conveniences” in the hills, the residents of Vermont hill farms “prefer the right to breathe and think and act freely and naturally” to the imposition of federal assistance and oversight. From the perspective of spokesmen like Aiken, government intervention posed an even greater threat to the state than the economic problems of the hill towns. At one point in his campaign against federal involvement in Vermont, Aiken complained that “I cannot help but feel that this situation is due to the insatiable desire of certain Federal authorities for more and more control of all of us and our possessions and resources, public and private.”[48]

During his campaign against the removal of farmers from submarginal areas, the lieutenant governor suggested that the towns and people would have benefited more if the money allotted for resettlement had been appropriated for rebuilding hilltop communities, rather than dismantling them. Aiken asserted:

> It is no exaggeration to say that had half the money which they had planned to use in tearing down our communities been spent in constructing new roads that could be traversed the year round, in improving our schools and libraries, in building electric lines, a world of good would have been accomplished. . . . It would have enabled the people who already live up in the hills to secure a greater share of the luxuries of life to which they are entitled, but for which they will never surrender freedom.[49]

Aiken and others argued that federal purchase would fix land prices at the submarginal level — between $1 and $4 an acre — and forever limit the potential for economic growth in the hill towns, especially in the event of increasing interest in summer home purchases. One commentator asked, “Is it not the duty of the state to see that this natural resource of the towns is preserved for its best use, especially so as it may in the future provide the financial salvation of many of our towns?” The issue increasingly became one of immediate versus eventual improvement, and many Vermonters had come to entertain hopes for future economic development in their mountain communities. As the situation in Warren and Sherburne — two of the towns studied in Bulletin 357 and now the sites of immensely profitable ski areas — has indicated, economic boom was indeed just around the corner. Although in the mid-1930s it was still unclear exactly how these hill communities might be developed, state legislators and political leaders were increasingly willing to sacrifice immediate economic improvement for the protection of state control over its land area.[50]

By October, the consensus among state and federal officials about the best interests of Vermont farmers had virtually dissolved. The minutes of the October 3, 1935 meeting of the Submarginal Lands Board demonstrate that the details of any land transfer were sensitive. The board's refusal to approve federal options for purchase in the Lake Bomoseen area had clearly inconvenienced and surprised the RA administrators, and Bradder informed the board that unless options were cleared within the near future, the money appropriated for Vermont would be reallocated to New York. Attempting to push the board toward action, he stressed the "humanitarian" benefits of providing universal access to the lakes in this region, as well as the ecological value of conservation.[51]

Vermont officials, nonetheless, had earlier decided to insist on certain conditions for any land transfers to the federal government, as legislated by the act providing for the conveyance of land to the federal government. H.365 (Act 3 of 1935) stipulated that the federal government would lease to the state of Vermont "any or all of such real property" purchased for use as state forests, parks, game reserves, and game sanctuaries for 999 years at a rental of $1. In the meantime, the state retained the option to purchase said lands back from the federal government — at any time over the course of the lease — for the price originally paid by the United States. Moreover, all land purchases would have to be approved not only by the Submarginal Lands Board and the governor, but also by the selectmen of the towns in which property was to be purchased.[52] The towns, after all, would lose tax revenues from public ownership of the lands, even as they gained recreational areas.[53] Board member George Aiken's account of this pivotal moment evokes some of the tension of the negotiations:

> The committee then asked upon what terms the land would be turned back to the State. Federal hands were thrown in the air in horror. Why, the very idea! No other State in the Union had even asked to know upon what terms this land would be returned to them. They all trusted their Uncle Sam. They knew that whatever terms were submitted would, of course, be to the advantage of the States, with Uncle playing the rôle of benefactor. . . . Federal eyes wept with sadness to think that Vermont should even want to know the terms. But the Vermont committee, surrounded by submarginal land which had supported generation after generation, was adamant. We would either know the terms that the Federal government proposed to make in this matter, or there would be no sale.[54]

Almost immediately after the board insisted on these conditions, the federal government discontinued work on the Vermont project and closed its office in Rutland. The state's requirements were far too restrictive for the RA program. Meanwhile, leaving Vermont the possibility of a rapprochement, the government sought to extend options on surveyed properties wherever possible, hoping to continue the project at a later date.[55]

After this impasse, state and federal officials exchanged a series of telegrams in late October and early November. During the correspondence the state administrator of the Works Progress Administration assured its director, Harry Hopkins, that a special session of the legislature was expected to discuss the submarginal lands issue and other questions. Requests that information about this session be kept confidential indicate that in spite of the general hostility to federal purchase of mountain lands, some officials in Vermont sought to override the refusal of others and facilitate cooperation with the RA.

The special legislative session of December 1935 and January 1936 considered an amendment to Act 3 of 1935 that would have made the terms of any land sale acceptable to the federal government, but it did not pass. Any chance of federal-state cooperation on resettlement was thus dismantled.[56] In April 1936, the RA sent notification to Governor Smith that the "farm to forest" program had been abandoned following the orders of Administrator Rexford Tugwell. The Vermont legislature had again refused to pass an act agreeable to the federal government that would have ensured the purchase and development of submarginal lands in Vermont under the RA's land utilization program.[57] For all intents and purposes, this signaled the end of discussions about the purchase of submarginal lands and resettlement in Vermont.

The Legacy of the "Farm to Forest" Program

Upon reflection on the opportunity offered by the submarginal lands purchase program, many Vermonters had come to determine that any control over state territory by a federal landlord was undesirable. The sense was strong among some, such as George Aiken, that Vermont retained the potential for future growth and success in the hill towns. Retaining for Vermonters the rights to eventual profits from the land, as well as the desire to privilege state over federal management of the land and its resources, were important in motivating the opponents of the submarginal lands program. Also, many in the state, like conservatives elsewhere, had come to fear the dramatic expansion of the federal government under the Roosevelt administration. The urge to support the much-needed relief measures of the New Deal was powerful, and several programs, such as the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC), achieved great success in the Green Mountains. Yet the innate insularity of the state challenged federal efforts to direct large-scale social reforms or to subsume any significant amounts of its territory into a national system. Though some measures were passed during the period of the submarginal lands controversy, most notably the expansion of the Green Mountain National Forest, these purchases contained no reformist undertones, and they did not arouse the suspicion of Vermont officials.[58] Land improvement and conservation, through the CCC and the National Forest, proved acceptable to Vermonters, while federal planning and social engineering projects were considerably less attractive. Some people cautioned that if all of the programs proposed for Vermont had been enacted in combination, a significant portion of the state would have passed into federal hands and the autonomy of the people would have been considerably circumscribed. Activism on the part of several state leaders precluded this, however, and Vermont emerged from the Great Depression far less altered by federal programs than many other states.

The fear of a gross expansion in federal power was not restricted to Vermont, as many others around the country also feared the growth of an increasingly powerful national government. Yet Vermont was receptive to the idea of improving economic and environmental conditions in the state. The extent of the planning for the submarginal lands project and the support offered by many prominent Vermonters demonstrate the Depression-era willingness to use any means necessary to improve the situation of the state and to prepare for a more secure future.[59] The issues relating to submarginal lands were not only tied to land use and profits; they also touched on local self-determination, property rights, and the independent spirit that was an important part of Vermont's self-perception. Ultimately, Vermont politicians heeded the warning of their emerging leader and looked beyond the "promise of immediate gain . . . to the shadow of permanent loss."[60] After almost two years of consideration, in early 1936 legislators rejected federal attempts to both plan for and manage land use in the mountains; they chose instead to trust George Aiken's assurances that spring would again return to Vermont.

Notes

[1] Franklin Delano Roosevelt, "First Inaugural Address," in *Documents of American History,* ed. Henry Steele Commager (New York: F. S. Crofts & Co., 1947), 420.

[2] William E. Leuchtenburg, *Franklin D. Roosevelt and the New Deal* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1963), 11.

[3] William E. Leuchtenburg, *Flood Control Politics: The Connecticut River Valley Problem, 1927–1950* (Cambridge, Mass., 1953); Hannah Silverstein, "No Parking: Vermont Rejects the Green Mountain Parkway," *Vermont History* 63 (Summer 1995): 133–157.

[4] "Retirement of Land Studied," *The Brattleboro Daily Reformer,* 10 July 1934.

[5] In fact, the per capita income for the U.S. in 1929 was $715, while that for Vermont was $699; in 1931, national per capita income had dropped to $425, while Vermont's averaged $503 — a figure exceeded by only twelve other states. From the report of the Brookmire Economic Service, 7 June 1932, as quoted in the *Burlington Free Press,* 4 July 1932, p.#3, as quoted in Harold Fischer Wilson, *The Hill Country of Northern New England: Its Social and Economic History in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (Montpelier, Vt.: Vermont Historical Society, 1947), 377n.

[6] "A Proposal for the Withdrawal From Cultivation of Poor Farm Lands in Vermont Under the Federal Submarginal Land Acquisition Program," Governor Wilson Papers, reel S-3192, "Submarginal Lands," Vermont State Archives (hereafter referred to as the VSA).

[7] Perry Merrill, page B-5 in folder "Writings on Land Use" from the Perry Merrill Papers in the Wilbur Collection, Bailey Howe Library, University of Vermont.

[8] Edwin Seligman, *Economics of Farm Relief: A Survey of the Agricultural Problem* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1929), 223–224.

[9] *Ibid*., 224.

[10] *Ibid*., 224.

[11] Sidney Baldwin, *Poverty and Politics: The Rise and Decline of the Farm Security Administration* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1968), 65–66.

[12] Harold Meeks, *Time and Change in Vermont: A Human Geography* (Chester, Conn.: The Globe Pequot Press, 1986), 161.

[13] Dorothy Canfield, *Vermont Summer Homes* (Montpelier, Vt.: Vermont Bureau of Publicity, 1934). This publication was produced annually and revised periodically by the author, also known by her married name of Dorothy Canfield Fisher.

[14] C. F. Clayton and L. J. Peet, *Land Utilization as a Basis of Rural Economic Organization, Based on a Study of Land Utilization and Related Problems in 13 Hill Towns of Vermont* (Burlington, Vt.: University of Vermont Agricultural Experiment Station, 1933), 5–6.

[15] Clayton and Peet, *Land Utilization,* 13–14.

[16] From 1919 to 1930, the number of operated farms dropped 25 percent, the number of partially operated farms increased 144 percent, and the number of abandoned farms increased 180 percent; *Ibid*., 33–36; Wilson, *Hill Country of Northern New England*, 362.

[17] Clayton and Peet, *Land Utilization,* 133.

[18] *Ibid*., 50–51.

[19] Vermont Commission on Country Life, *Rural Vermont: A Program for the Future by 200 Vermonters* (Burlington, Vt.: Free Press Printing Company, 1931), 2, 130.

[20] Henry C. Taylor, "The Vermont Commission on Country Life," *Journal of Farm Economics* 11 (January 1930): 168.

[21] George D. Aiken, *Speaking from Vermont* (New York: Frederick A. Stokes Company, 1938), 10.

[22] D. Gregory Sanford, "The Presidential Boomlet for Governor George D. Aiken, 1937–1939, Or You Can't Get There from Here," (UVM Masters Thesis, 1977): 69.

[23] The Land Policy Section of the AAA had functions defined as the following: "To determine the total area of land needed for production of the various agricultural commodities and forest products in the US; to work with other agencies in designating areas which need to be withdrawn from agricultural production and areas which should be restricted to extensive use, and in determining utilization of areas withdrawn from farming; in general to coordinate the program of the AAA with the government land utilization program." The Surplus Relief Corporation appointed the AAA as the administrator of the planning and development of specific submarginal land acquisition projects. "Retirement of Land Studied, Vermont Committee Prepares to Join Federal Project," *Brattleboro Daily Reformer,* 10 July 1934; letter from L. C. Gray to J. E. Carrigan, 25 May 1934, Governor Wilson Papers, reel S-3192, "Submarginal Lands," VSA.

[24] The place this document occupies in the governor's papers indicates that it came into his files during the early summer of 1934. I believe that it is probably the document referred to in a letter on 8 June 1934 from E. H. Jones to Governor Wilson. The Vermont State Archives was unable to date the document or to trace its authorship.

[25] An enumeration of income-producing products demonstrates the poor quality of the farmlands in these six areas. Potatoes made up most of the crop sales, representing significantly less than 10 percent of the total income from the farms.

[26] "A Proposal for the Withdrawal From Cultivation of Poor Farm Lands in Vermont Under the Federal Submarginal Land Acquisition Programme," Governor Wilson Papers, reel S-3192, "Submarginal Lands," VSA.

[27] The report also suggested that two or three towns be eliminated, though it did not indicate which ones; it argued that significant savings could be achieved from this consolidation.

[28] "A Proposal for the Withdrawal From Cultivation of Poor Farm Lands in Vermont."

[29] It is worth noting that the first proposal had suggested 86,000 acres for immediate federal purchase and the relocation of 295 families, while the August proposal was less specific in its description of 20,000 acres for purchase and 250 families for resettlement.

[30] Submarginal Land Committee, "A Proposal for the Purchase of Submarginal Lands in Vermont," 14 August 1934, Governor Wilson Papers, reel S-3192, "Submarginal Lands," VSA; letter from Governor Stanley Wilson to the Submarginal Land Committee, 14 September 1934, Governor Wilson Papers, reel S-3192, "Submarginal Lands," VSA.

[31] Letter from Howard L. Hindley to Hon. Stanley C. Wilson, 4 September 1934, Governor Wilson Papers, reel S-3189, "FERA," VSA; letter from Governor Wilson to Howard Hindley, 13 September 1934, Governor Wilson Papers, reel S-3189, "FERA," VSA.

[32] Letter from Perry Merrill to Hon. Stanley C. Wilson, 25 September 1934, Governor Wilson Papers, reel S-3192, "Submarginal Lands," VSA; letter from A.W. Manchester to Perry Merrill, 24 September 1934, Governor Wilson Papers, reel S-3192, "Submarginal Lands," VSA.

[33] George Aiken, cited in Sanford, “Presidential Boomlet for Governor Aiken,” 69, 77.

[34] When this committee was named, Aiken had already taken his executive position as lieutenant governor, even though he calls himself Speaker of the House in this statement. Aiken, *Speaking from Vermont,* 10.

[35] Letter from P. H. Ballou, Selectman, Town of Chester to Hon. Stanley C. Wilson, 16 July 1934, Governor Wilson Papers, reel S-3192, “Submarginal Lands,” VSA.

[36] *Burlington Free Press*, 4 March, 1936,1.

[37] The plan designated three types of areas in the state: valleys, where agriculture, industry, and tourism were primarily centered; the slopes of hills and mountains which were formerly farmed but were “at the moment” better suited for summer homes and recreational areas; and mountain wilderness areas, which were ideal for trails and camping areas, serving both residents and tourists and preserving the wild beauty of the state.

[38] *Journal of the House,* 6 February 1935, 232–234.

[39] Christopher McGrory Klyza and Stephen Trombulak, *The Story of Vermont* (Hanover, N.H.: University Press of New England, 1999), 100.

[40] The officials on the National Forest board were the governor, lieutenant governor, attorney general, state forester, and commissioner of agriculture.

[41] Klyza and Trombulak, *Story of Vermont,* 100; “An Act to Amend Section 54 of the Public Laws and to Repeal Section 55 of the Public Laws Relating to the National Forests and Concurrent Jurisdiction Therein,” H.293, 26 March 1935, Governor Smith Papers, reel S-3196, “Submarginal Lands,” VSA; Perry Merrill, *History of Forestry in Vermont, 1909–1959* (Montpelier, Vt.: Vermont Historical Society, 1959), 50–51; minutes from the committee formed by H.293, 7 May 1935, Governor Smith Papers, reel S-3196, “Submarginal Lands,” VSA.

[42] This board consisted of the lieutenant governor, speaker of the house, auditor of accounts, and the attorney general. Also present at this meeting were the governor and the commissioner of forestry.

[43] Minutes from the committee formed by H.365, 7 May 1935, Governor Smith Papers, reel S-3196, “Submarginal Lands,” VSA.

[44] W. E. Bradder to Governor Charles Smith, 17 August 1935, Governor Smith Papers, reel S-3196, “Submarginal Lands,” VSA.

[45] Telegram from Carl C. Taylor, Director of the Division of Resettlement and Rural Rehabilitation, to Governor Charles Smith, 22 June 1935, Governor Smith Papers, reel S-3195, “Rural Rehabilitation,” VSA; Franklin D. Roosevelt, Executive Order for the Establishment of the Resettlement Administration, 30 April 1935, amended 26 September 1935, Governor Smith Papers, reel S-3196, “Submarginal Lands,” VSA.

[46] “Rehabilitation Gives a Man a Break,” *Vermont Farm Bureau News* (October 1935): 8f.

[47] Aiken, *Speaking from Vermont*, 22.

[48] *Ibid*., 176.

[49] *Ibid*., 30.

[50] *Ibid*., 17, 30; “One Phase of the Submarginal Land Problem and Its Relation to Proposed Purchase and Retirement by A.A.A.,” Governor Smith Papers, reel S-3196, “Submarginal Lands,” VSA.

[51] Minutes from meeting of legislative board mandated by H.365, 3 October 1935, Governor Smith Papers, reel S-3196, “Submarginal Lands,” VSA.

[52] H.365 of 1935, reported by the Committee on Conservation and Development, “An Act Giving Consent to the Acquisition by the United States by Purchase or Gift of Certain Lands Under Certain Conditions.”

[53] Minutes from meeting of legislative board mandated by H.365, 3 October 1935, Governor Smith Papers, reel S-3196, “Submarginal Lands,” VSA.

[54] Aiken, *Speaking from Vermont,* 11.

[55] Letter from A.W. Manchester to Attorney General Lawrence Jones, no date, Governor Smith Papers, reel S-3196, “Submarginal Lands,” VSA.

[56] *House Journal, Special Session 1935–1936* (Montpelier, 1937): 1264, 1301–1302, 1336–1339, 1341–1343, 1379.

[57] Letter from Dorothy M. Beck to Governor Smith, 10 April 1936, Governor Smith Papers, reel S-3194, “Rural Rehabilitation,” VSA.

[58] Richard Munson Judd, *The New Deal in Vermont: Its Impact and Aftermath* (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1979), 82–83.

[59] In spite of the enthusiasm generated nationally among planners and some farmers for the programs of the Resettlement Administration, only 4,441 families were moved — a sliver of the 500,000 projected in early estimates. Neither the money nor the infrastructure existed to facilitate such considerable transfers of population. Leuchtenburg, *Franklin D. Roosevelt and the New Deal,* 140.

[60] *Brattleboro Reformer,* 11 January 1935, as cited in Sanford, “Presidential Boomlet for Governor Aiken,” 76.