

## **Graziers and Grandin**

### **Vermont Grazing and Livestock Conference a Nourishing Experience**

By Troy Bishopp

Fairlee, VT—At 10pm, long after the community of 800 farmers, guests, exhibitors and Dr. Temple Grandin had left the two day 16<sup>th</sup> Annual Vermont Grazing and Livestock Conference held at the Lake Morey Resort in Fairlee, Vermont, only one soul remained.

With eyes reddened from insomnia and emotion, and muscles sore from lugging conference materials around, Jennifer Colby donned an exhausting but wry smile indicative of success from countless hours of event planning. The veteran coordinator for UVM Extension Center for Sustainable Agriculture's Pasture Program and newly minted Master's Degree graduate summed up her exhausting work: "I'm like a Marine, first in and last one out."

Her experience in working with the Vermont Grass Farmers Association and Vermont Beef Producers Association and lining up a solid line-up of speakers, topics, sponsors and tradeshow vendors, securing local food and assembling a cadre of caring volunteers scurrying about the facility, added up to smashing the record book for conference attendance.

"For farmers, timing is everything," Colby wrote in the conference brochure, quoting the late Jon Rutter, a dairy farmer and founding member of the Vermont Grass Farmers Association. "(He) said that to me some years ago, and it's a sentiment I've carried forward in my heart, my farm, work and personal life.

"The conference theme, 'Nourishing the Northeast by Educating Ourselves' is about timing too, in a way," she wrote. "The more we know about ourselves, about our markets, about our pricing and production; the more we know about our neighbors and the world, the better prepared we'll be able to move Vermont farmers and livestock to the next level."

As noted in the 2011 Vermont Farm to Plate Initiative report, livestock sales counted for \$76 million and 42% of non-dairy sales in 2002, and the inventory of livestock raised for meat increased by 46% between 1997 and 2007. Studies indicate that more than 47% of Vermont dairy farms employ grazing for a significant part of their forage. Forty-eight percent of Vermont's farms now engage in livestock production, and 54% of those include some permanent pasture or rangeland.

A full day pre-conference intensive workshop on pricing, production and processing devoted to better understanding the components of raising meat for a diversity of customers was filled to capacity. It featured presentations on elements to think about while pricing your meat products by Beth Holtzman and Jessie Schmidt of the Women's Agricultural Network.

Afterward, Vermont's own master "Gourmet Butcher" Cole Ward and Steve Moeller, Professor of Animal Science at Ohio State University taught participants to break down lamb and pork into primal cuts while answering a myriad of questions about packaging, marketing and customer relations.

The energy carried over into Saturday's fantastic line-up featuring Dr. Temple Grandin of Colorado State University famous for her work in animal behavior, humane livestock handling systems and prolific research and writing to help people understand Autism.

The brutally honest, passionate Cow Girl Hall of Fame inductee and one of Time magazine's "100 most influential people in the world" took to the podium 3 separate times addressing meat industry animal welfare audit guidelines, procedures and problems, understanding animal emotions and humane handling facilities and a special evening, open to the public, program dedicated to addressing the topic of autism in children that may be "different, not less".

She quipped these thoughts throughout the day: "After 35 years, why do we have to keep talking about handling animals humanely? The #1 thing that cattle handlers can do from an animal welfare standpoint is to calm down. A good head-gate is good health insurance. Sow gestation crates are stupid. Yelling and using a hot shot to move animals is unnecessary with proper handling systems and a non-slip floor. Never turn your back on a bull. I cannot emphasize enough the importance of a good teacher. You've got to keep autistic children engaged with the world. You cannot let them tune out."

In addition to Dr. Grandin's three presentations, there was a concurrent kid's conference and sixteen grazing related sessions widely ranging from grazing basics to understanding weed management; multi-species grazing strategies to extending the grazing season; the economics of local beef to swine management and reclaiming fallow land to learning about biological monitoring.

These tracks were taught by a who's who of grazing authorities headlined by Jason Rowntree, Beef Specialist and Researcher from Michigan State University, Sid Bosworth, state extension agronomist from UVM, Betsy Hodge, Livestock Educator from St. Lawrence Co. CCE, Lisa McCrory, Pasture Management Consultant, Eric Noel, The Organic Mechanic from Maplewood Organics, Louise Calderwood, self-employed livestock systems teacher and the always popular, Sarah Flack, grazing consultant, author and organic inspector.

The nourishing of relationships and education was brought to fruition over a delicious lunch buffet prepared by the Lake Morey banquet staff made with products from Vermont farms and businesses concluding with an always impressive ice-cream social from the Strafford Organic Creamery that allowed farmers to trade business cards, cement friendships and tell stories.

As the car trunk closed on the residual boxes of conference paraphernalia tickled with a light snow, Ms. Colby poignantly stated, “I’m now fully nourished and ready to start planning for #17.”

For more information on the presentations, ideas and future grazing initiatives heading into spring, contact Jennifer Colby at (802) 656-5459, e-mail [jcolby@uvm.edu](mailto:jcolby@uvm.edu) or go to [www.uvm.edu/sustainableagriculture](http://www.uvm.edu/sustainableagriculture)

*Published in Lancaster Farming 2/4/2012*