VERMONT CONSERVATION PLAN

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OBJECTIVES & PATHWAYS

JUNE 12, 2025

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INTRODUCTION TO THE COMMUNITY RESILIENCE AND BIODIVERSITY PROTECTION ACT (CRBPA)

The goal of the CRBPA is to promote healthy forests, habitat connectivity, biodiversity protection, outdoor recreation, sustainable forestry and agriculture, public health and climate resilient communities. By conserving a connected network of functioning lands throughout the state, we will give human and natural communities room to adapt to a changing climate, nurture a thriving and sustainable forest products industry, make our food and forest products sectors more secure, and buttress a robust recreation and tourism economy.

Approximately 1.6 million acres, or approximately 27% of Vermont's land is permanently conserved through public ownership and conservation easements on private lands, and more than 2.4 million acres are enrolled in Vermont's Use Value Appraisal program (some of which are also conserved).

Conserved lands are the foundation for landscape health and connection, and they support billions in economic activity from tourism, recreation, hunting and fishing, the forest products and agriculture sectors. Despite Vermont's long tradition of land protection and stewardship, these values are under threat from parcelization and subdivision, as well as climate change impacts like flooding, drought and wildfires. **Click here** to review the CRBPA as passed in 2023, and **here** to review the initial Conserved Lands Inventory, reports and other materials facilitated by VHCB, in consultation with ANR, during the spring and summer of 2024. Click **here** to review the timeline to finalize the Vermont Conservation Plan, which we expect to complete by the end of June, 2026.

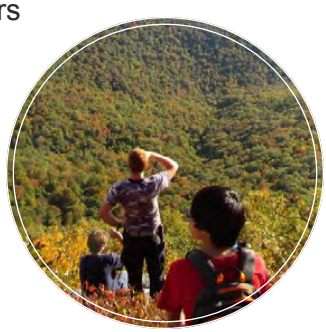
HOW WE'RE DOING THIS WORK:

- Using Vermont Conservation Design as a principle framework to understand where additional conservation investments will have the biggest impact on landscape health. **Click here** for a story-map tutorial on VCD.
- Getting input from statewide leaders on our Technical Advisory Committee, who will provide feedback and advice to VHCB and ANR at every stage of the process. **Click here** to review the TAC charter.
- Listening to conservation stakeholders in the regions where they live and work in three iterative cycles to learn about and provide feedback on the Conservation Plan as it evolves. **Click here** to learn more about our regional stakeholder process and register for a regional listening session in your area.
- Engaging with technical experts to flesh out the details, actions, investments and programs needed to successfully implement the CRBPA. **Click here** to learn more about the role technical working groups will have to develop the details of the plan.

OBJECTIVE 1 : CENTER VERMONT CONSERVATION DESIGN

Maintaining, Protecting and Enhancing Ecological Integrity and Function

This objective outlines pathways to protect, restore and maintain a functioning and connected natural and working landscape. To focus this work, we used Vermont Conservation Design, a science-based framework to protect the lands, waters and wildlife that are most critical to an ecologically functional landscape. Vermont Conservation Design (VCD) allows us to identify strategically where to build upon our existing network of conserved lands to advance the ecological goals envisioned by Act 59. The VCD framework also highlights the need to promote conservation at all scales – from large forest blocks and riparian corridors to rare natural communities and species with specific habitat needs – in order to maintain and enhance ecological function and connection.



PATHWAYS

Pathway 1A: Ecological Representation - Expand Vermont's conserved lands to better represent all nine biophysical regions.

Vermont's conserved lands are not equally distributed across Vermont's nine biophysical regions. In terms of acreage, more of Vermont's major forest blocks, connectivity blocks and important habitats have been conserved in the Northern Green Mountains, Southern Green Mountains, and Northeastern Highlands than in the other six biophysical regions. Each biophysical region has its own ecological context, with characteristic natural communities and species, but a significant percentage of Vermont's currently conserved lands protect high-elevation mountain natural communities and their species. In contrast, low-elevation settings such as sandplains, clayplains, floodplains, and calcium-rich bedrock low hills all support species and natural communities not found in the mountains. This pathway places additional focus on the six under-represented biophysical regions, ensuring that these places and their biodiversity will be conserved.

Pathway 1B: Connectivity Corridors - Protect the priority landscape-scale corridors within Vermont's regional connectivity network that promote overall forest health and function.

Ecological connectivity among large protected forest blocks is important both for wide-ranging species like black bear, moose, and American marten, and to accommodate the long-term shifts of plant and animal distributions in response to climate change. Protecting the corridors for plants and animals to naturally shift and redistribute is perhaps the single most important step we can take to ensure Vermont's biodiversity is resilient to climate change. A network of connected forest blocks can provide this connectivity, both across the state, and across the region. Vermont is also an important ecological linkage between the Adirondacks, the Berkshires, and the mountains of New Hampshire, Maine, and Quebec. Past land conservation efforts have largely focused on protecting large blocks of core habitat, but there has been less focus on the smaller "stepping stones" that provide connections between these core habitats. This pathway identifies the regionally important corridors most in need of additional permanent land conservation, and the actions needed to ensure these corridors stay connected.

PATHWAYS

Pathway 1C: Forest Structure - Improve representation of old forests by strategically establishing Ecological Reserve Areas in biophysical regions outside the Northern and Southern Green Mountains, while also managing for a balance of forest structure, including young and old forests, in Biodiversity Conservation Areas and Natural Resource Management Areas.

Both young and old forests are rich in biodiversity, and both conditions are underrepresented in Vermont. Vermont Conservation Design identifies targets for restoring old and young forest in order to balance forest age and structure, increase biodiversity, sequester and store carbon, and increase resilience to climate change. Additional investments to establish Ecological Reserve Areas in the biophysical regions outside the Northern and Southern Green Mountains will help support each region's characteristic natural communities and species. At the same time, establishing Biodiversity Conservation Areas and Natural Resource Management Areas will support active management to restore both young and old forest conditions. This pathway identifies the biophysical regions and their forest types that have been underrepresented in Ecological Reserve Areas, as well as locations for establishing Biodiversity Conservation and Natural Resource Management Areas.

Pathway 1D: Aquatic Systems - Support and encourage the stewardship, management, and restoration of riparian areas and aquatic systems on new and existing conserved lands.

Connected aquatic and riparian systems are critical to maintaining biodiversity and ecological function. Land conservation supports healthy aquatic systems when it protects riparian functions or mitigates surface runoff and improves water quality within a watershed. However, land conservation by itself is not always sufficient to fully maintain and restore aquatic systems, and the water quality, flood resilience, and biodiversity benefits they provide. This pathway identifies the actions needed to steward, manage, and restore riparian areas and aquatic systems on both existing and new conserved lands.

Pathway 1E: Rare and Significant Ecological Features - Enhance and increase the protection of rare and uncommon species, significant natural communities, and the important habitats of Vermont Conservation Design.

An ecologically functional landscape needs all its parts. The fine-scale mix of rare and uncommon plants and animals, significant natural communities, and important habitats (such as grasslands and vernal pools) are the biodiversity gems of Vermont's landscape. Many of these occur in small, specific settings, and will not be conserved unless they are specifically sought out. They often have specific management and stewardship needs, requiring active attention even after land is permanently conserved. This pathway highlights the need to focus on these gems, and identifies priorities for conservation of rare species, natural communities, and important habitats.

OBJECTIVE 2: GROW CONSERVATION IN COMMUNITIES

Connecting People and Communities to the Land

This objective focuses on conservation investments that yield social and community benefits while protecting and promoting the health of our lands and watersheds. The conservation of working forests, agricultural lands and the provision of recreational and educational opportunities that connect people with the land are all integral to a land conservation strategy that fulfills the overall vision of Act 59.

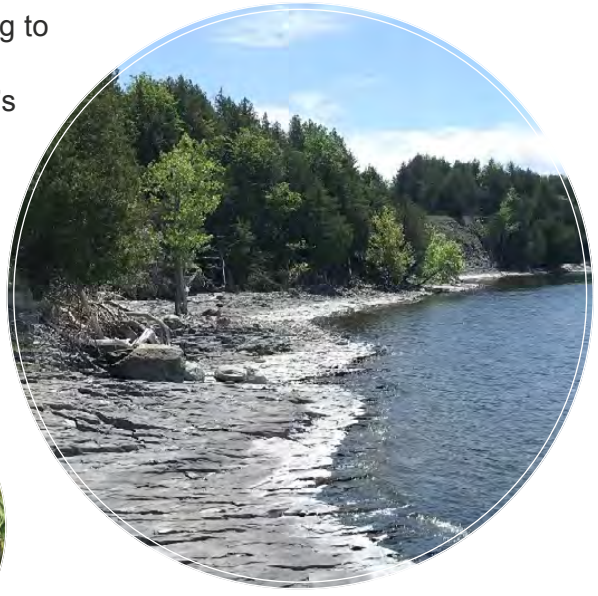
PATHWAYS

Pathway 2A: Working Lands - Promote the resilience, ecological function and productivity of Vermont's working farms and forests.

Working forests and agricultural lands are important cornerstones of Vermont's landscape and conservation future. It is more important than ever to protect the lands that produce the food and forest products upon which we and our economy depend by conserving these lands in perpetuity and making ecologically oriented land management practices more viable. This pathway will identify strategies and investments to lift up Vermont's work under the Forest Future Roadmap, the Food Resilience Roadmap and other related plans, in order to protect critical working lands in perpetuity and provide the technical and financial supports needed to increase the viability and expanded use of ecologically beneficial land management practices.

Pathway 2B: Outdoor Recreation - Support a wide range of outdoor recreation opportunities, accessible to diverse user groups, through investments in land protection and management strategies.

Access to outdoor recreational opportunities, from hunting and fishing to hiking and biking to walking and wildlife watching, is essential to the health and well-being of Vermonters and visitors alike. This pathway's actions will be coordinated with the implementation of the state's blueprint for outdoor recreation, Move Forward Together Vermont, aimed at strengthening outdoor recreation opportunities across the state. This pathway will identify the protection and stewardship investments needed to improve access to a diverse suite of recreational opportunities on conserved lands, while protecting ecological values as well.



PATHWAYS

Pathway 2C: Equitable Access - Make access to land more equitable.

Act 59 calls for the Conservation Plan to make "recommendations to provide and increase equitable access to protected and conserved lands and land-based enterprises." Access to conservation benefits varies by demographic and socioeconomic status and region. Therefore, this pathway aims to identify investments and programmatic opportunities to expand and improve equitable access to conserved lands, land-based enterprises and recreational opportunities that support the interests of all our conservation stakeholders.

Pathway 2D: Climate Resilience - Invest in the natural solutions needed to make Vermont's communities, ecological integrity and working lands more resilient in the face of climate change.

Vermont is experiencing more frequent and intense climate-related events, including heat waves, drought, flooding, and forest disturbances. Meeting these challenges will require scaling up strategic land conservation efforts and implementing nature-based climate solutions that will make landscapes and communities more resilient. This pathway will identify actions and investments, that, in coordination with Vermont's Climate Action Plan and Resilience Implementation Strategy, would provide multiple co-benefits at once, including community resilience, habitat connectivity, improved water quality and critical resource protection.

Pathway 2E: Place-Based Education and Outreach - Promote educational opportunities that connect communities to conserved lands and foster communications between conservation organizations and communities.

Vermont's conserved lands are living classrooms and laboratories that support myriad educational opportunities. From a town forest adjacent to an elementary school, to university research on state land, to a master naturalist program visiting the local nature reserve, our conserved lands support educational opportunities that help Vermonters form lasting connections to the natural world. At the same time, conservation organizations need to help landowners and communities understand how they can benefit from land conservation. Thus, this pathway will identify actions that help ensure that our conserved lands support educational opportunities that help Vermonters form lasting connections to the natural world and help communities, landowners and land managers understand why, how and where to conserve lands.

OBJECTIVE 3: STRENGTHEN CONSERVATION CAPACITY

Expanding the conservation community's ability to sustainably protect and steward land

This objective focuses on the foundational work of building the human resources, program infrastructure, funding and innovation needed to successfully implement Act 59 in both the near term and for years to come. This will strengthen the whole conservation community, including VHCB and ANR, NGO conservation organizations, municipalities, landowners, and the many public and private organizations who support them. Our collective ability to do the work needed to meet the goals of Act 59 depends upon having the resources in place to support our work at each stage of conservation planning, land acquisition, management, restoration and stewardship.

PATHWAYS

Pathway 3A: Funding and Financing - Increase funding and financing to support the land protection, stewardship, and capacity of the conservation community.

To meet Vermont's immediate and long term conservation vision and goals, we will need a significant increase in conservation funding at each stage of the conservation process, from planning to land acquisition to long term management, restoration and stewardship. In our work to develop the initial Act 59 Inventory Report, we recommended that Vermont will need to triple current funding for land protection alone in order to meet the 2030 goal, in addition to increasing resources for project development, long term management, restoration and stewardship. This pathway will propose ways to increase existing funding sources, identify new funding sources, and explore creative methods to finance our conservation work to meet these important goals.

Pathway 3B: Steward and Restore - Support the stewardship and restoration of Vermont's lands.

Sustainable land conservation is not only about legally protecting land. It also requires continued long-term care for the land and its values. Given public demands for access to conserved land, in addition to the need to restore degraded wetlands, streams, floodplains, and other habitats, a discrete focus on stewardship capacity is essential for the long-term health of conserved lands. And, the need for stewardship capacity will only grow as we conserve more lands to meet the goals of Act 59. This pathway will identify the actions, innovations and new partners needed to better support the sustainable stewardship and strategic restoration of lands and their natural functions.

PATHWAYS

Pathway 3C: Scale - Promote conservation across local, regional, statewide, and transboundary scales.

To meet our long term goals for a connected and functioning landscape, we need to advance conservation efforts at multiple scales. This includes the statewide conservation organizations who focus on large parcels and conservation at the landscape-scale. We also need local organizations working to address community priorities, as well as regional groups collaborating within and between counties. And we need to consider how Vermont can connect to the larger conservation efforts that cross state and national borders. This pathway will identify systems and investments to support conservation organizations operating at all scales of our conservation work.

Pathway 3D: Support System - Grow the support system of practitioners, contractors, and community leaders.

Land conservation organizations rely on skilled professionals and engaged community members to perform their work. They need surveyors, appraisers, attorneys, ecologists and foresters, as well as selectboard and conservation commission members, to protect Vermont's lands and waters, forests and fields. This pathway will identify priority investments in training, education, outreach and organization to ensure that the systems are in place to support conservation efforts moving forward.

Pathway 3E: Programs and Practices - Design and develop new programs and tools that help increase the pace, quality and impact of our conservation investments.

If we are to meet our conservation goals, we need to develop and implement new conservation programs and tools. Existing tools, such as fee ownership and conservation easements, are very effective, but require significant funding and resources to implement and steward. Especially in light of changes and cuts at the Federal level for programs and funding sources that have supported so much work in Vermont, we need to ensure that our conservation tools are as efficient and effective as possible. This pathway will identify new and innovative programs and tools, beyond those we already employ, that can expand our ability to meet our conservation goals.

MORE INFORMATION

To learn more about the VCP TAC or project status, please contact:

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