



VERMONT CONSERVATION PLAN **FRAMEWORK REPORT**



October 16, 2025



VERMONT CONSERVATION PLAN FRAMEWORK REPORT

The Vermont Legislature has directed the Vermont Housing and Conservation Board (VHCB), in consultation with the Vermont Agency of Natural Resources (ANR), to lead the process of developing a Vermont Conservation Plan (VCP).

There are two milestones in this work, both led by VHCB in consultation with ANR. The first was the Conservation Inventory Report, completed in Phase 1 of the project in September 2024.

Phase 2, and the second milestone of the project, is the development of the Vermont Conservation Plan. This will be formed with input from a range of stakeholders, including private owners of forest lands and agricultural lands, land trusts, conservation organizations, environmental organizations, working lands enterprises, outdoor recreation groups and businesses, watershed groups, municipalities, regional planning commissions, conservation commissions, and relevant State and federal agencies, as well as the general public. The planning, research and engagement work for the Vermont Conservation Plan Phase 2 will run from May 2025 to June 2026.

This Framework Report has been compiled by Future iQ based on material drafted by VHCB and ANR staff, with input from the project Technical Advisory Committee (TAC) and general public at this summer's regional listening sessions.

This report presents the three main objectives, and a series of possible pathways, to achieve the goals of the Vermont Conservation Plan. These objectives and pathways were presented to the TAC and also used to gather input during regional listening sessions in July and August 2025. The primary source materials used to prepare this work were Vermont Conservation Design (VCD), the Phase 1 Inventory, and other references to relevant plans and processes.

More information can be found at:

lab2.future-iq.com/vcp

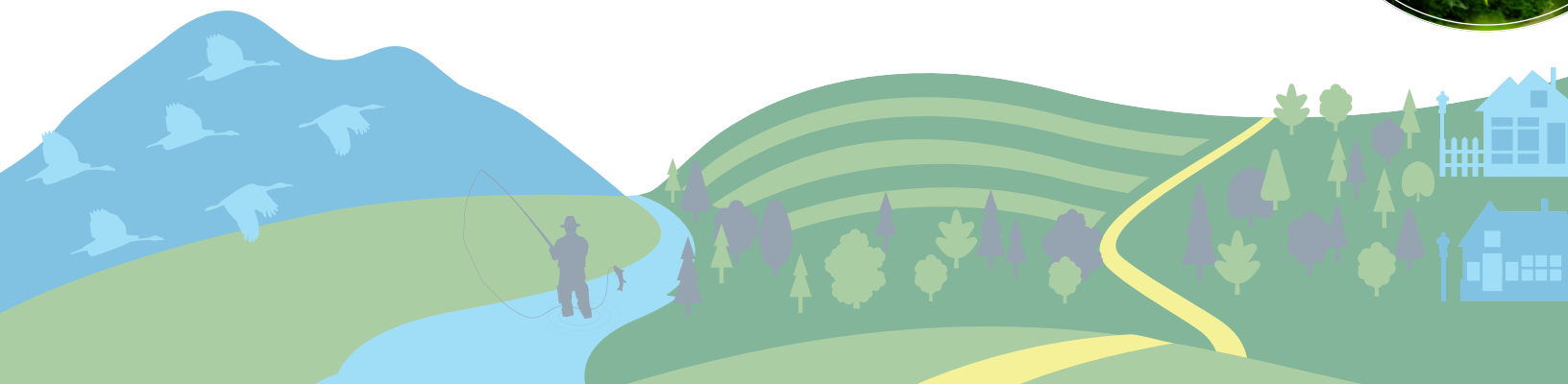


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Dear Friends:



Thank you for taking the time to review this initial **Draft Framework** for the **Vermont Conservation Plan**. We greatly appreciate all the time Vermonters have spent this year helping us to get to this point, and we hope you will find this to be a helpful window into our work of the last nine months to recommend a conservation plan to the Vermont General Assembly by June of 2026. We are sharing with you the initial framework, or outline, we are proposing for the Vermont Conservation Plan. We invite your feedback! If you are interested in learning more about the law, our planning process, or want to provide input on the Framework and future iterations of the plan as we move forward, please visit our [project portal](#).

It has been a privilege to meet and talk to so many people since the passage of Act 59 in 2023. Last year, hundreds of Vermonters contributed their time and suggestions to our work in Phase I of this process, helping us assemble the [initial conservation inventory](#) mandated by Act 59 and informing our initial recommendations to the General Assembly. You joined focus groups, dedicated staff time or volunteered personal time on one or more of the many working groups. You answered surveys and questionnaires, and you provided considered, actionable suggestions to prioritize conservation actions and investments for the next 25 years. We are asking for your help at a critical time to protect the natural and working lands of our beautiful state as we prepare for the challenges ahead.

Act 59 provides us with an opportunity to imagine the future outcomes we can realize by working together. Functioning and connected ecosystems. Access for all. Clean water. Resilience projects that protect the lands, wetlands and waters that surround and flow through our downtowns and village centers enriching our lives immensely. A focus on working farms and productive forests to protect the lands that produce our food and forest products, and to support the rural enterprises and a way of life that is tied to the land. Farmers markets and community gardens. Hunting, fishing, hiking, watching, swimming, biking, skiing, climbing, riding... and the many treasured places we visit to enjoy what we love doing in Vermont.

Forces beyond our control, from climate change to political instability, chip away at our focus on the power of working together. And this process has not been insulated from the larger context that surrounds Vermont. From floods to fires to Federal funding freezes, economic and environmental uncertainty threaten the natural environment and the rural communities that both depend upon and steward these lands. This has made our work together more difficult and urgent at the same time.

So *thank you*, again. We need your help and value your input. From the beginning of this process, VHCB has worked to design an effort that will result in a conservation plan that will help us continue our proud tradition of caring for our lands and waters, bringing communities together, and finding solutions and innovations to meet the challenges of today and tomorrow.



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1.0 | INTRODUCTION – CONSERVATION IN VERMONT

1.1 | INTRODUCING THE VERMONT CONSERVATION PLAN (VCP)

For decades, Vermonters have worked to protect our state's natural beauty, open vistas, forests, and verdant agricultural lands. This has produced significant success, thanks to the strong partnerships between willing landowners, agency and non-profit partners, scientists, towns and many other partners.

The Community Resilience and Biodiversity Protection Act (CRBPA - Act 59 of 2023) creates the mechanism and mandate to take stock of what has been achieved to date and map out recommendations to protect the beauty and integrity of the state's natural and working lands.

Vermont's track record of conservation success comes from supporting and working with a range of interested stakeholders including communities, landowners, loggers and farmers, hunters, anglers and other recreationists.

VISION AND GOALS OF THE COMMUNITY RESILIENCE AND BIODIVERSITY PROTECTION ACT

CRBPA - Act 59 of 2023 states that the **vision of the State of Vermont is to maintain an ecologically functional landscape** that sustains biodiversity, maintains landscape connectivity, supports watershed health, promotes climate resilience, supports working farms and forests, provides opportunities for recreation and appreciation of the natural world, and supports the historic settlement pattern of compact villages surrounded by rural lands and natural areas.

- It is the goal of the State that 30 percent of Vermont's total land area shall be conserved by 2030, and 50 percent of the State's total land area shall be conserved by 2050. The Secretary of Natural Resources shall lead the effort in achieving these goals. The land conserved shall include State, federal, municipal, and private land.
- Reaching 30 percent by 2030 and 50 percent by 2050 shall include a mix of ecological reserve areas, biodiversity conservation areas, and natural resource management areas. In order to support an ecologically functional and connected landscape with sustainable production of natural resources and recreational opportunities, the approximate percentages of each type of conservation category shall be guided by the principles of conservation science and the conservation targets within Vermont Conservation Design, prioritizing ecological reserve areas to protect highest priority natural communities and maintain or restore old forests.

The Vermont Conservation Plan will only be successful to the extent that it is based on learning, research, outreach, and collaboration. Conservation depends upon the partnership of willing landowners and conservation entities. There is an opportunity to expand the suite of opportunities for Vermonters who choose to conserve and/or want to enjoy the myriad community benefits from conserved lands.

1.2 | THE VERMONT CONSERVATION PLAN – KEY PRINCIPLES

Initial work with stakeholders has identified some important key principles that will help guide the development of the Vermont Conservation Plan. These principles support the direction provided by the Community Resilience and Biodiversity Protection Act (CRBPA - Act 59 of 2023).

The key principles include:



FOCUSES ON VISION AND GOALS

The Vermont Conservation Plan (VCP) is focused on fulfilling the vision and goals of Act 59, as outlined in the previous section. This helps frame the work in an aspirational context, that will help spur innovative new approaches. The VCP will help guide future conservation in a way that reflects the desires of stakeholders and the legislature.



COLLABORATIVE APPROACH

The planning approach is strongly grounded in broad outreach and engagement with multiple stakeholders and communities. The planning process offers a 'call to action' to deepen the collaborative approach, because implementation of the plan will depend on working together.



PLAN CENTERED ON VERMONT CONSERVATION DESIGN (VCD)

The foundation for our ecological work is VCD, a framework that maps the most important lands and waters to protect. The VCD framework outlines a scientific vision for an intact, connected and diverse ecologically functional landscape that supports nature and all its benefits.



ACTIONABLE AND MEASURABLE

The VCP will be built on actionable steps and providing a clear and accountable way to measure implementation and success. The Phase 1 work provided a benchmark of the area of land currently under conservation, and Phase 2 work will outline an understandable pathway to increase the conserved area to achieve the targets of '30 by 30' and '50 by 50'.



BUILDS ON EXISTING WORK

There is already considerable work underway across Vermont, and the VCP will connect to and build on this important work, exploring ways to 'modernize' and broaden the conservation toolkit and approach. It will also focus on 'durable conservation' that will ensure the conserved land can be managed and stewarded in a sustainable and long-term manner.



FOCUSES ON MAINTAINING THE VIABILITY OF WORKING LANDS AND FORESTS

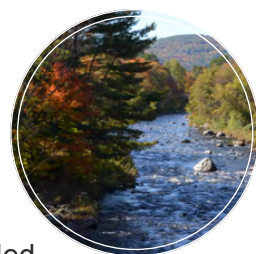
The natural and working lands in Vermont provide a wide range of important uses to the people of the State. These uses are respected, and the viability of working lands and forests is recognized as critical to long-term success.



ADDRESSES EQUITY OF ACCESS

The issue of equitable access will be addressed in the plan, to ensure that conserved lands become a resource for all people across the State, and for decades to come.

The VCP will act as a guiding roadmap for the implementation of the vision and goals embedded in Act 59. It will not be a prescriptive land use plan, and it is unlikely to address all challenges and needs, nor focus on only one type of conservation. It is about finding the right balance between the needs of conservation and working landscapes.





2.0 | IMPORTANCE OF CONSERVING LAND IN VERMONT

2.1 | CONSERVATION IN VERMONT - CURRENT STATUS

Approximately 1.6 million acres, 27% of Vermont's land base, is permanently conserved through public ownership and the thousands of conservation easements landowners have voluntarily placed on their private lands.

This mosaic of natural and working lands fans out from our communities and town centers. It perpetuates Vermont's land use pattern of downtown and village development surrounded by productive farmland, working forests, wildlands and long views of rolling hills and forestlands. Vermont's lands extend from the shore of Lake Champlain up to the Green Mountains and down to the Connecticut River. The state is famous for its open spaces, large tracts of forestland, and clean, swimmable lakes and rivers.

- Some of Vermont's characteristic habitats include **northern hardwood forests, alpine meadows, River Cobble Shore, and red maple-black gum basin swamps.**
- Vermont is home to thousands of species, including over **100 mammal, reptile and amphibian species, over 250 bird species, about 100 species of fish and approximately 2,000 plant species.** Overall, there are an estimated 20,000 to 40,000 species in the State.
- **These plants and animals need adequate habitat to persist.** This work will help us better ensure the wildlife and plant life we have now will still be here in the future, as well as make room for species that need to move north in the face of climate change.

The 1.6 million acres of conserved lands in Vermont provide a lot of services to people who live in this landscape. When we conserve key lands and watersheds, we enjoy cleaner air and water, more successful crop pollination, carbon sequestration, flood mitigation, healthier soils, wildlife that can persist into the future, increased recreational opportunities, sustainable forestry products and agricultural productivity.

"The ecologically functional landscapes in Vermont support numerous social and economic values, as well as ecosystem services such as supporting clean air, clean water and flood water attenuation."

-VCD Summary Report 2018



Fast Facts

- A conservation easement is a tool a landowner can voluntarily choose to use to permanently conserve natural and/or working lands on their property without selling the whole property.
- The landowner does this by putting a conservation easement on their lands and that easement is then held by a qualified conservation entity.



2.2 | VERMONT'S NATURAL AND WORKING LANDSCAPES

Vermont's natural and working landscapes are an essential and treasured part of the Vermont traditions and culture. The landscape offers a deep variety of recreational opportunities, and places for people to pursue their interests, sports and livelihoods. This also delivers a broad range of benefits, well beyond the important economic impact.

The forests and landscapes of Vermont have provided food and essential resources for people for many thousands of years. In more recent times, these natural resources provide a foundation of large and successful industries. The natural and working landscapes in Vermont are a critical to the economic and social functioning of the State. These natural and working landscapes are a key economic driver, and deliver benefits such as:

- Healthy natural and working lands are the very foundation of our recreation and tourism-based businesses, forests and farms. Vermont's **outdoor recreation economy generated \$2.1 billion in 2023**. Vermont's farms produce **\$786 million in agricultural commodities**.
- The forest products sector, including maple sap collection, provides nearly **14,000 jobs** for Vermonters, generates **\$2.1 billion in annual sales**, and supports **\$30.8 million in additional economic activity** from trail uses and seasonal tourism.
- Our natural lands and open spaces are good for human health. **Research continues to support the recommendation that time in nature is essential for both physical and mental health:** helping to alleviate and reduce stress, improve sense of well-being and cognitive function and decrease our heart rate and blood pressure, even with a short period of contact. Doctors have even begun to prescribe time in nature for patients needing more of these benefits.

Vermont's network of lands supports billions of dollars in economic activity from tourism, recreation, hunting and fishing and the forest products and agricultural sectors. This work is key to the state's economic well-being.

"Public surveys show strong support for conservation in Vermont. Vermonters value wildlife, nature, the state's rural character, and our working forests and farms. We depend on the natural landscape to support these and other values."

-VCD Summary
Report 2018



Fast Fact

- The Trust for Public Land conducted an economic analysis and found that every \$1 invested in land conservation by the state returns \$9 in economic value in natural goods and services, such as water quality protection, flood mitigation, and food production, to the Vermont economy.



2.3 | NEED FOR MORE ACTION

Despite Vermont's long tradition of land protection and stewardship, our natural and working lands are under threat as more acres are developed and as climate-driven change impacts the landscape.

As a result, our lands are less resilient in the face of the climate-related impacts such as intensification of flooding, drought, wildfire and non-native species and pests. Key challenges include:

- 75% of the state's river miles are disconnected from their floodplains so rising waters don't have room to spread out and slow down before they approach towns and communities. This leads to more **intense floods that put lives and homes at risk.**
- Wildlife **habitat is being whittled away every year**, making it harder for animals to have the room they need to find food, shelter and mates.
- Forests are increasingly fragmented as they are cut into smaller pieces with multiple owners. The U.S. Forest Service estimates that **Vermont may be losing upwards of 13,000 acres of forestland every year.** At that rate, over 300,000 acres of forestland may be lost by 2050.
- Additionally, if recent trends continue, **41,200 acres of Vermont's farmland will be paved over, fragmented, or converted to other uses by 2040**, undermining the future of a robust agricultural economy in the state. This is the equivalent of losing 200 farms and hundreds of jobs.

The Community Resilience and Biodiversity Protection Act (CRBPA - Act 59 of 2023) required the development of an actionable strategy to conserve more natural and working lands between now and 2050, in a way that creates a cohesive, resilient and productive network of lands and watersheds for years to come.



"Habitat loss and fragmentation, non-native species, and a rapidly changing climate all pose grave threats to species and ecosystems. The future of Vermont's forests, waters, and wildlife is uncertain."

-VCD Summary Report 2018





The work in Vermont will aim to contribute to and learn from other interstate and regional conservation efforts.

3.0 | COLLABORATIVE PLANNING

3.1 | IMPORTANCE OF A COLLABORATIVE PLANNING APPROACH

Vermont has a history and culture of collaboration. The process for developing the Vermont Conservation Plan will build on this broad collaborative approach.

Vermont has a lot going for it with respect to this ambitious conservation effort, including a rich tradition of conservation and land stewardship, and a network of communities invested in conservation in their region. The process will draw in conservation-minded landowners and residents, natural resource agencies, universities, and non-profit organizations.

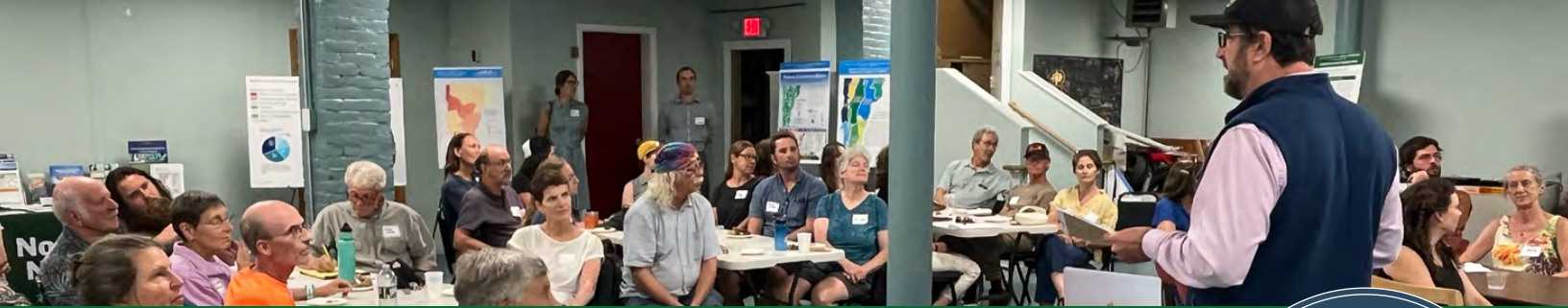
- This planning process is an opportunity to **leverage that collective energy** for the creation of a plan for Vermont's unique challenges and opportunities. However, it is important to remember that **we need resources to successfully move from ideas to practices.**
- **80% of Vermont's lands are privately held**, which means partnerships with those stewarding the state's privately-owned lands are key. For this work to be successful, we need to provide more opportunities for voluntary partnerships between communities, landowners, non-profit organizations, agencies, and local planning and resource commissions. **The goal is to give landowners more access to the tools and opportunities that allow them to participate in conservation work** in a way that works for them.
- We have **reviewed other states' plans and strategies** for pursuing their own 30x30 goals. This has helped inform and shape this current planning effort. For example, we reviewed California's planning framework and learned from Maine's and Maryland's approach to conservation planning for both natural and working lands.

Most of the neighboring New England states are engaged in similar efforts, with a focus to connect wildlife habitat, maximize reliance on local wood products, improve watershed health and make the region more climate resilient, while supporting smart growth development and economic productivity.



Photo Courtesy of VTF&W





3.2 | BUILDING ON PHASE 1 ENGAGEMENT WORK

Phase 2 engagement work will help chart a path for continuing this important component of Vermont's conservation future.

There are two key milestones in this work, both led by VHCBC, in consultation with ANR. The first is the **Conservation Inventory Report**, which was completed in Phase 1 of the project, which included extensive stakeholder engagement.

VHCBC and ANR heard from many voices in the “inventory phase” of this planning effort between January and September of 2024. The conversations we had during the inventory phase underscore the fact that this work is both urgent and complex. Conservation can deliver significant social and economic benefits including supporting rural livelihoods, protecting habitat, and providing public access to nature.

- We also heard, emphatically, that **realizing this vision will require additional resources**. In a time of limited funding, we need to be creative, strategic, and efficient with the resources available.
- It should also be noted that many participants in the inventory phase emphasized the **connection between conservation and climate resilience**, which is also a key component of the guiding legislation. This includes the importance of protecting wetlands and forests that store carbon and flood waters, as well as sustaining working lands in a changing climate.
- Across all these conversations, we heard about the importance of **building a more inclusive conservation movement** that includes historically underrepresented and marginalized Vermonters more wholly.



Fast Facts - Phase 1 Engagement Metrics

- Stakeholder and community engagement for the Phase 1 included 47 interviews, 21 focus groups with over 350 participants, an online survey with 147 respondents, and four working groups comprising over 35 members that dedicated dozens of hours of work.
- Working groups were established to provide focused input on several questions outlined in Act 59. Primary focus groups included Aquatic Systems, Agricultural Lands, Conservation Categories, State Lands, and Funding and Financing. Additional ad-hoc focus groups focused on funding and intergenerational land transfers.





3.3 | ENGAGING WITH STAKEHOLDERS ACROSS VERMONT

The development of the Vermont Conservation Plan aims to include strong stakeholder engagement and build on good science.

This will help shape the three primary objectives and various pathways, in a way that reflects the values and aspirations of important stakeholder groups. Key stakeholder groups include:



TECHNICAL ADVISORY COMMITTEE

The VCP Technical Advisory Committee (TAC) will play a key role to help synthesize technical and stakeholder input and craft a viable plan. The TAC will comprise of representatives from statewide leaders, reflective of the stakeholder groups identified in the Act. The TAC will act as an initial sounding board and provide input and perspective on various aspects of the project throughout the process to develop the Conservation Plan, but will not make decisions about the plan.



REGIONAL STAKEHOLDERS

Regional Stakeholders will have important perspectives and insights to add to the VCP development. It is recognized that there will be many different views, and they may vary across different regions. Therefore, we will host three rounds of regional stakeholder meetings to solicit input, suggestions and perspectives around the State. These are being held in four locations across the State in July 2025, December 2025 and April 2026. This first round helped identify local successes, challenges, opportunities, barriers, and begin to identify priority actions.



In addition, we will be working with the Vermont's regional planning commissions to convene conservation stakeholders in the regions where they live and work. Another key aspect is engaging with programmatic staff at ANR, VHCB and within the conservation community to flesh out the details, actions, investments and programs needed to successfully implement the Vermont Conservation Plan.



3.4 | COORDINATING WITH RELATED VERMONT PLANNING EFFORTS

The CRBPA – Act 59 planning effort will be cross-pollinating and coordinating with the other state related plans and programs. There are numerous statewide and regional efforts aimed at land use and the management of natural and working lands.

We will need to coordinate the plan's development with these complementary efforts already tackling housing, working forests, recreation and regional conservation needs. Our goal is for the Vermont Conservation Plan to uplift those other efforts while diligently focusing on the specific legislative charge for this plan.

VERMONT-BASED PLANS AND EFFORTS INCLUDE:

- **Vermont's State Forest Action Plan (2017)** - This plan outlines goals and planned actions designed to meet five desired future forest conditions centered around biodiversity conservation, enhancing forest ecosystem health and ecological productivity, and ensuring Vermont has a legal, institutional, and economic framework in place for forest conservation and sustainability.
- **Vermont Department of Fish and Wildlife: Wildlife Action Plan (2025)** - Goal is to conserve species of greatest conservation need and keep common species common. Strategies include restoration of aquatic and wildlife habitat and providing assistance and incentives for wildlife-compatible resource use.
- **Vermont Climate Action Plan (2021, update in 2025)** - Calls for increasing the pace of land conservation in Vermont and recommends the conservation of 30% of Vermont's land by 2030. Includes a focus on "adaptation and building resilience in natural and working lands," managing natural and working lands for biodiversity, forest health and climate resilience, and planning for statewide landscape connectivity and forest blocks conservation through the Staying Connected Initiative and Vermont Conservation Design.
- **Resilience Implementation Strategy (2025)** - Aims to build off existing state plans, including the Climate Action Plan. Priority actions include land conservation and biodiversity protection, sustainable land practices (for recreation, agriculture and forestry) and restoration of water resources.
- **Vermont Forest Future Strategic Roadmap (2024)** - 10-year strategic plan to protect the long-term viability of forest-based businesses and the many benefits they provide to our state's environment, economy and way of life. Overarching goal is to minimize the loss of forest cover to conversion and to promote biological diversity, forest health and productivity, forest products and ecosystem services.
- **Food Security Roadmap to 2035 (2024)** - Goals are food security for all of Vermont, for Vermont farms to have the resources needed to be resilient, and for communities to have tools to support food security.
- **Act 182 (2022)** - The Land Access and Opportunity Board was created to engage with Vermont organizations working on housing equity and land access "to recommend new opportunities and improve access to woodlands, farmland, and land and home ownership for Vermonters from historically marginalized or disadvantaged communities who continue to face barriers to land and home ownership."
- **Move Forward Together: Statewide Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan 2025-2030 (2025)** - A strategic vision and set of priority actions that seek to support and enhance outdoor recreation across the state. Actions are centered on stewardship, wellness and economic development, with throughlines of climate resilience and equity.
- **Act 181 (2024)** - Streamlines permitting for housing and infrastructure development in designated compact zones primed for growth, such as downtowns and village centers, and strengthens criteria related to forests. Includes designation of "Tier 3" lands for critical resource area protection.

4.0 | VERMONT CONSERVATION DESIGN (VCD) FRAMEWORK

“Vermont Conservation Design is based on the concept of an ecologically functional landscape. Maintaining and enhancing ecological function across the landscape is fundamental to conserving biological diversity.”

-VCD Summary Report 2018

The foundation for our ecological work is Vermont Conservation Design (VCD), a framework that maps the most important lands and waters to protect.

The VCD framework outlines a scientific vision for an intact, connected and diverse ecologically functional landscape that supports nature and all its benefits. It is based on a science-based mapping and data tool that helps identify areas that are valuable for conservation. Vermont Conservation Design is a helpful guide for community-powered conservation planning, helping landowners, communities and the conservation community understand which lands and waters in their region are most important for protecting at-risk natural communities.

- Vermont Conservation Design is a practical plan because it sets **science-based quantitative and distributional goals** for maintaining and restoring an ecologically functional landscape.
- For the first time, this plan provides a scientific benchmark for long-term conservation success in the state. Vermont Conservation Design is also practical because the **aim is sustaining ecological functions and environmental services, using the full range of conservation and management tools**. These functions and services provide enormous benefits to nature and to people, and they cannot be replaced once they are lost.
- Vermont Conservation Design is grounded in Vermont’s tradition of **responsible land stewardship**.
- Vermont Conservation Design is efficient because it **specifically identifies or targets a minimum number of features to achieve conservation success**. Vermont has tens of thousands of native species; it is simply not possible to study and conserve each one individually. Vermont Conservation Design targets those features of the landscape that support the most species and ecological processes. In this way, we can **confidently work towards long-term support** of ecological function without needing to understand the life-history of every species.
- We recognize that **some species will always require special conservation attention** and Vermont Conservation Design helps us to focus on the species with the greatest needs.*

VCD is not a roadmap or regulatory overlay, but instead a resource that can be used to see where the most strategic opportunities are to protect Vermont’s lands and waters. Perpetual conservation is only one of the strategies to protect biological diversity and landscape health, and the conservation plan will be integrated with other long-term, durable strategies for land protection like Vermont’s Current Use program or regulatory and zoning protections for natural resources.

*Bullet points source: VCD Summary Report 2018





5.0 | THE VERMONT CONSERVATION PLAN – DRAFT FRAMEWORK



The mandate of The Community Resilience and Biodiversity Protection Act (CRBPA – Act 59) is to produce a conservation plan that will prioritize conservation investments that help to protect healthy forests, habitat connectivity, biodiversity protection, outdoor recreation, sustainable forestry, public health and climate resilient communities.

THE VISION OF THE VERMONT CONSERVATION PLAN

CRBPA - Act 59 of 2023 states that the vision of the State of Vermont is to maintain an ecologically functional landscape that sustains biodiversity, maintains landscape connectivity, supports watershed health, promotes climate resilience, supports working farms and forests, provides opportunities for recreation and appreciation of the natural world, and supports the historic settlement pattern of compact villages surrounded by rural lands and natural areas.

VERMONT CONSERVATION PLAN FRAMEWORK - KEY OBJECTIVES

The Vermont Conservation Plan will be based on three key objectives, each of which has a set of pathways, or key focal areas, which will drive the identification of a set of actions that helps advance conservation in ways that are thoughtful, strategic and pragmatic, setting Vermont on a course to a healthier and more resilient future.

OBJECTIVE ONE

SUPPORT CONSERVATION IN COMMUNITIES

This objective is focused on how to better connect people and communities to the land, and to advance conservation in ways that benefit people and protect natural and working lands.

OBJECTIVE TWO

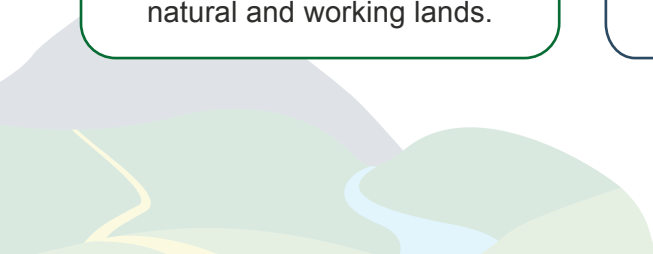
CENTER VERMONT CONSERVATION DESIGN

This objective is focused on how to protect, restore and maintain an ecologically functioning and connected natural and working landscape.

OBJECTIVE THREE

STRENGTHEN CONSERVATION CAPACITY

This objective is focused on expanding the conservation community's ability to sustainably protect and steward land.



5.1 | OBJECTIVE ONE: SUPPORT CONSERVATION IN COMMUNITIES

This objective is focused on how to better connect people and communities to the land. It aims to advance conservation in ways that benefit people and communities by protecting natural and working lands, enhancing recreation, and supporting equitable access.

Conservation investments benefit people and communities and make our lands and watersheds healthier. The conservation of natural and working forests and agricultural lands and the expansion of recreational and educational opportunities all connect people with the land. All these benefits help fulfill the overall vision of CRBPA - Act 59.

Objective One reflects both the spirit and substance of Act 59 by positioning thriving communities, farms, and forests as integral to long-term conservation success.



Connection to CRBPA - Act 59 and Phase 1 Outcomes

- Phase 1 participants stressed the need for conservation efforts that are not only ecological but also social, including access to nature, cultural relevance, recreational opportunities, and fairness in how conservation benefits are distributed.
- Phase 1 outputs from the Agricultural Lands Working Group strongly advocated for the ecological value of conserved farmland, pasture, and soil systems. This is directly reflected in the pathways, which aim to 'lift-up' the Food Resilience and Forest Future Roadmaps.
- Focus groups, particularly with farmers, loggers, and recreation advocates, emphasized that conservation cannot succeed without recognizing community resilience and land use traditions.



Objective 1: Support Conservation in Communities

IMPLICATIONS FOR THE VERMONT CONSERVATION PLAN

The following is an initial list of implications associated with this objective. These implications will be considered more fully as the pathways and actions are built-out as part the development of the Vermont Conservation Plan.



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 for landowners.



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.



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.”



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.



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.





Objective 1: Support Conservation in Communities

POTENTIAL PATHWAYS

These potential pathways are an initial starting point to developing the Vermont Conservation Plan. These will be further refined shaped by stakeholder input.



PROMOTE NATURAL AREAS AND SUSTAINABLE WORKING LANDS

This pathway will identify strategies and investments to make conserved working lands more resilient, ecologically functional and healthy. We need more technical and financial supports to make ecologically beneficial land management practices viable for landowners. This pathway will 'lift up' related work under Vermont's Forest Future Roadmap, Food Security Roadmap and other related plans.



INCREASE EQUITABLE ACCESS

This pathway aims to identify investments and programmatic opportunities that will expand and improve equitable access to conserved lands, land-based enterprises and recreational opportunities.



SUPPORT OUTDOOR RECREATION

This pathway will promote diverse outdoor recreation opportunities through strategic investments in land protection and management. We need to identify ways to improve recreational access while protecting ecological values as well. This pathway's actions could 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.



STRENGTHEN CLIMATE RESILIENCE

This pathway will identify actions and investments in nature-based solutions that make Vermont's communities and conserved lands more resilient in the face of climate change. These actions will yield multiple benefits, including community resilience, habitat connectivity, improved water quality and critical resource protection. This pathway will be coordinated with Vermont's Climate Action Plan and Resilience Implementation Strategy.



EXPAND PLACE-BASED EDUCATION AND OUTREACH

This pathway will promote educational opportunities that connect Vermonters to the natural world, and expands cultural empowerment that promotes human-earth connections. It will also help communities, landowners and land managers understand why, how and where to conserve lands.

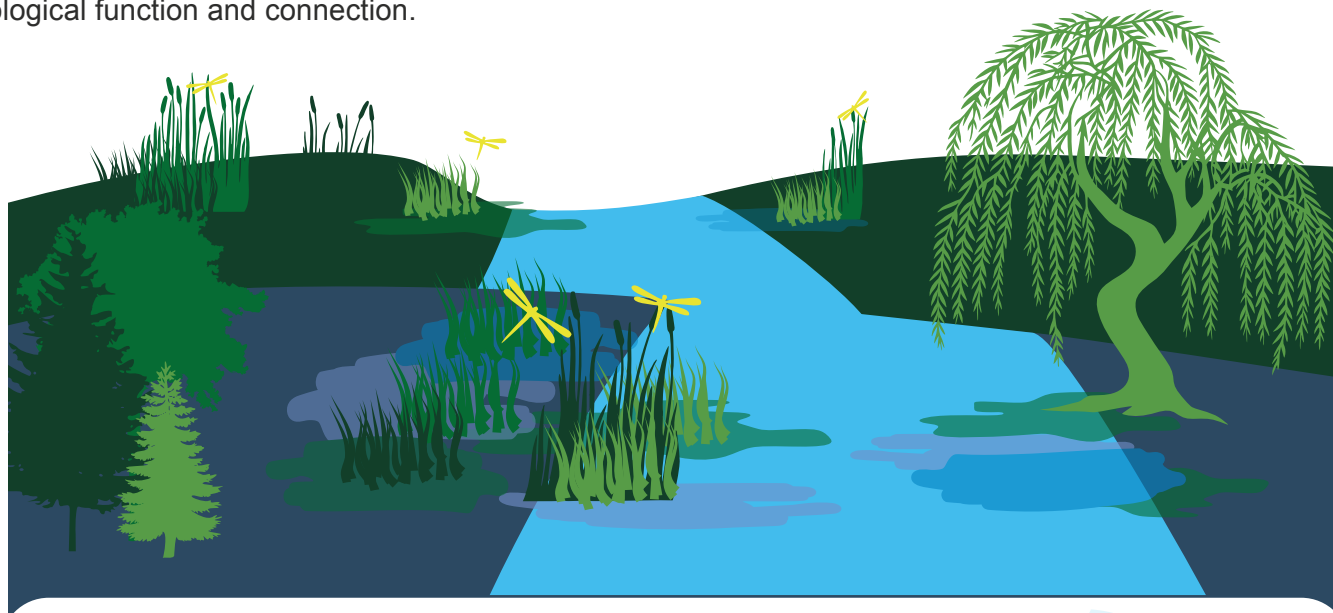


5.2 | OBJECTIVE TWO: CENTER VERMONT CONSERVATION DESIGN

This objective is focused on how to protect, restore and maintain an ecologically functioning and connected natural and working landscape.

This objective is guided by Vermont Conservation Design (VCD), a science-based framework to protect the lands, waters, plants and wildlife that are most critical to an ecologically functional landscape. Vermont Conservation Design (VCD) allows us to identify where we can build upon our existing network of conserved lands in ways that advance the ecological goals envisioned by Act 59. The VCD framework 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 – to ensure we maintain and enhance ecological function and connection.

CRBPA Act 59 calls for using Vermont Conservation Design to prioritize and guide the 30x30 goal, recognizing VCD as a strategic science-based framework to sustain Vermont's ecologically functional landscape.



Connection to CRBPA - Act 59 and Phase 1 Outcomes

- This objective aligns directly with Act 59's directive to use Vermont Conservation Design (VCD) as the backbone for identifying priority conservation areas.
- Phase 1 stakeholders repeatedly endorsed the need for science-driven conservation strategies. The Aquatic and State Lands working groups (2024) both affirmed that planning tools like VCD are critical to ensuring ecological integrity across both public and private lands.
- Stakeholder interviews and focus groups also noted a gap in representation of low-elevation ecosystems, which Objective 1 seeks to correct through pathway on Ecological Representation.
- Conservation Categories Workgroup (2024) recognized the value of permanently protected natural systems and emphasized minimal interference management strategies.

IMPLICATIONS FOR THE VERMONT CONSERVATION PLAN

The following is an initial list of implications associated with this objective. These implications will be considered more fully as the pathways and actions are built-out as part the development of the Vermont Conservation Plan.



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.



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.



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.



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.



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.



»»»»» POTENTIAL PATHWAYS

These potential pathways are an initial starting point to developing the Vermont Conservation Plan. These will be further refined shaped by stakeholder input.



EXPAND ECOLOGICAL REPRESENTATION

This pathway is focused on better representing all nine biophysical regions, and places additional focus on the six under-represented biophysical regions, ensuring that these places and their biodiversity will be conserved.



PROTECT CONNECTIVITY CORRIDORS

This pathway identifies ways to protect landscape-scale corridors within Vermont's regional connectivity network that are conservation priorities, promote overall forest health and function, and keep corridors connected.



IMPROVE FOREST STRUCTURE

This pathway addresses 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. Actions taken under this pathway will improve representation of both old and young forests as well as the complexity and diversity of forest structure across the landscape.



SUPPORT AQUATIC SYSTEMS

This pathway identifies the actions needed to steward, manage, and restore riparian areas and aquatic systems on both existing and new conserved lands.



PROTECT RARE AND SIGNIFICANT ECOLOGICAL FEATURES

This pathway highlights the need to enhance and increase the protection of rare and uncommon species, significant natural communities, and the important habitats of Vermont Conservation Design.



5.3 | OBJECTIVE THREE: STRENGTHEN CONSERVATION CAPACITY

This objective is focused on expanding the conservation community's ability to sustainably protect and steward land.

This plan's success is dependent on having the people, programs, funding and innovations needed to successfully implement Act 59 in years to come. This work includes strengthening the whole conservation community, including the Vermont Housing and Conservation Board, the Agency of Natural Resources, conservation organizations, municipalities, landowners, and the many public and private organizations that support community-level conservation. Phase 1 input reported concerns about underfunding and limited access to financing tools. Stakeholders requested streamlined, permanent funding mechanisms and equitable access to technical support.

**Phase 1
Inventory Report**
acknowledged that
without expanded staffing
and system support,
the goals of Act 59 are
"inactionable," especially
for state land planning,
management and
protection.



Connection to CRBPA - Act 59 and Phase 1 Outcomes

- Objective Three squarely addresses the major barriers raised across Phase 1, especially in the Funding and Capacity work and interviews with NGOs and landowners. The call for tripled investment in land protection aligns with the pathways, which include proposing expanded funding for planning, acquisition, and stewardship.
- Many focus groups, including those involving BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and people of color) stakeholders, noted that conservation success depends on who has access to resources.
- Act 59 was clear in its finding that resilient ecosystems require resilient management and support systems. Objective Three answers that call by proposing stronger public-private collaboration, financial innovation, and expanded support networks.

IMPLICATIONS FOR THE VERMONT CONSERVATION PLAN

The following is an initial list of implications associated with this objective. These implications will be considered more fully as the pathways and actions are built-out as part the development of the Vermont Conservation Plan.



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**. Resources are needed for planning, conservation easement and land acquisition, long-term management and protection, restoration and land and easement stewardship. In the Phase 1 work to develop the initial Act 59 Inventory Report, the Funding and Capacity Workgroup recommended that **Vermont would need to triple current funding for land protection alone to meet the 2030 goal**.



Sustainable land conservation is not only about legally protecting land. It also requires **continued long-term care for the land and its values**. Given the need to restore degraded wetlands, streams, floodplains, and other habitats, we need stewardship capacity 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.



To meet our long-term goals for a connected and functioning landscape, **we need to advance conservation efforts at multiple scales**. We need to support the statewide conservation organizations who focus on large parcels and conservation at the landscape-scale. We also need the local organizations that are working to address community priorities, as well as regional groups collaborating within and between counties.



Land conservation organizations rely on skilled professionals and highly engaged community members to perform their work. They need surveyors, appraisers, attorneys, ecologists and foresters, as well as select board and conservation commission members, to protect Vermont's lands and waters, forests and fields.



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. Given federal cuts to programs and funding for this work, **we need to ensure that our conservation tools are as efficient and effective as possible**.



»»»»» POTENTIAL PATHWAYS

These potential pathways are an initial starting point to developing the Vermont Conservation Plan. These will be further refined shaped by stakeholder input.



INCREASE AND OPTIMIZE FUNDING AND FINANCING

This pathway will propose ways to increase funding and financing to support the land protection, stewardship, and capacity of the conservation community.



SUPPORT STEWARDSHIP AND RESTORATION

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.



PROMOTE CONSERVATION AT DIFFERENT SCALES

This pathway will identify systems and investments to support conservation organizations operating at local, regional, statewide, and transboundary scales.



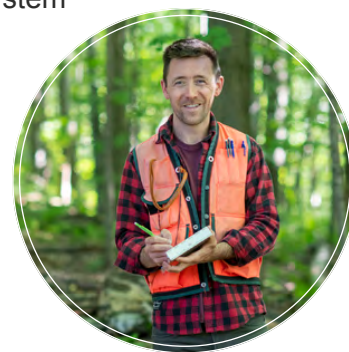
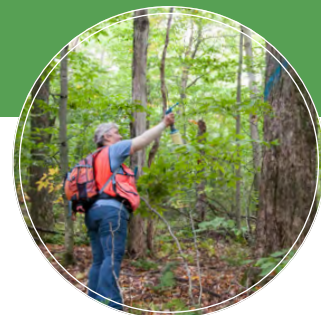
EXPAND THE SUPPORT SYSTEM AND CONSERVATION COMMUNITY

This pathway will identify strategies and investments that will grow the support system of practitioners, natural resources management contractors, and community leaders needed to support conservation efforts into the future. This pathway will also expand the conservation community to be representative of Vermont's diverse communities and viewpoints.



DEVELOP NEW PROGRAMS AND PRACTICES

This pathway will identify new programs and tools that help increase the pace, quality and impact of our conservation investments to expand our ability to meet our conservation goals.



6.0 | OUTCOMES OF INITIAL REGIONAL LISTENING SESSIONS

The first major round of public engagement in Phase 2 was the set of five regional listening sessions held in July and August 2025. These were held in different locations around the State.

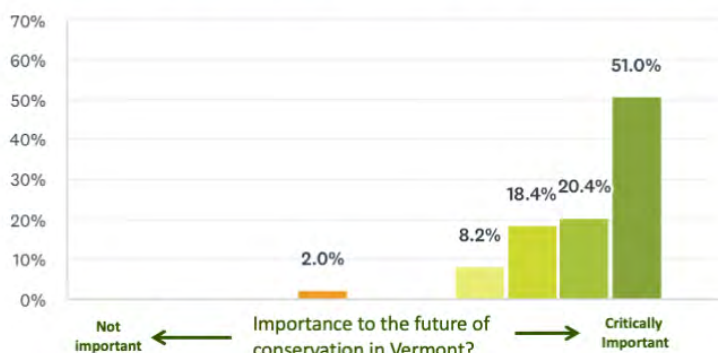
The Regional Listening Sessions were three-hour programs that included presentation on key aspects of the draft plan, case study posters, and interactive feedback exercises. These sessions were attended by approximately 200 people in total, and the overall response was very positive.

Regional Listening Sessions:

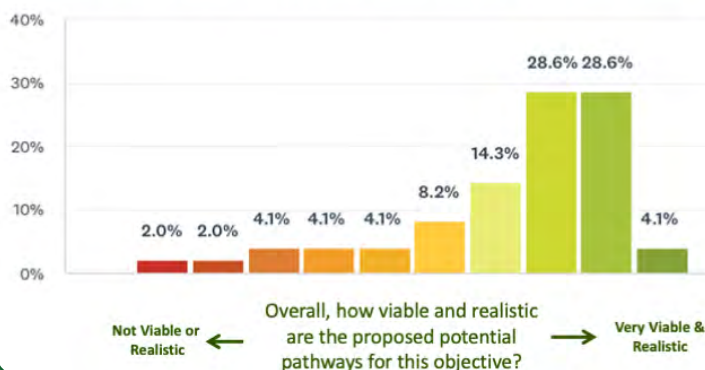
- Wednesday, July 23 - Ludlow, VT
- Thursday, July 24 - South Burlington, VT
- Tuesday, July 29 - East Burke, VT
- Wednesday, July 30 - Brandon, VT
- Tuesday, August 5 - Virtual

Participants were asked to assess each of the draft objectives, in terms of how important they saw that objective for the future of conservation, and how viable and realistic were the associated potential pathways. Examples of the responses for Objective One are shown below.

Objective One: Support Conservation in Communities



Objective One: Support Conservation in Communities



Fast Facts

- The responses were very similar from the four in-person sessions, and the virtual listening session.
- Overall, there was strong support for the three proposed objectives, which provides validation that these are on the right track and that they reflect the important issues.
- The support for the potential pathways was more 'muted', reflecting that some people did not see them as particularly viable and realistic. This was often related to the cost of implementation in a challenging funding environment. This provided good input on where the pathways and actions need more refinement.

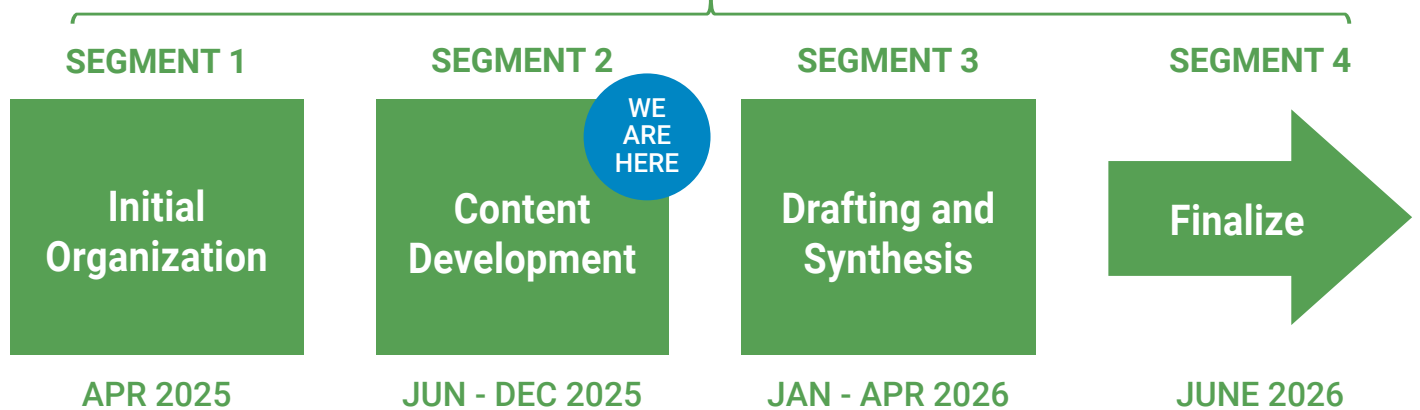
7.0 | NEXT STEPS AND HOW TO GET INVOLVED

The development of the Vermont Conservation Plan is intended to be a collaborative planning process, drawing together the perspectives and input from a wide cross section of stakeholders.

As part of the Phase 2 work, the development of the Vermont Conservation Plan involves considerable input from key stakeholders. This work is broken into key segments.



VERMONT CONSERVATION PLAN | PATHWAYS TO THE FUTURE



The current focus is on the **content development** for the plan. This segment is focused on input from stakeholders, including the following steps:

- Public input at Regional Stakeholder Listening Sessions – held in July / August 2025, and planned for early December 2025. These are being held in multiple locations around the State.
- Ongoing input and suggestions from the Technical Advisory Committee (TAC), via regular meetings (see the [project portal](#) for more detail on the TAC).
- Public input on the draft Objectives and Pathways, via survey and direct submission options on the [project portal](#).
- Sector specific engagement sessions, to allow more detailed discussion and focused input.



HOW TO GET INVOLVED

The project portal provides direct updates on the development of the Vermont Conservation Plan. This includes news on upcoming sessions, opportunity to review draft material, copies of presentations, and access to surveys and direct submissions. You can also sign up to follow the project and receive regular e-newsletters.



»»»»» MORE INFORMATION

This Framework Report has been compiled by Future iQ based on material prepared by VHCB and ANR staff, with initial input from the project Technical Advisory Committee (TAC) and the general public at the Regional Listening Sessions. This draft will be used for further input and discussion with key stakeholders.

More information can be found at:

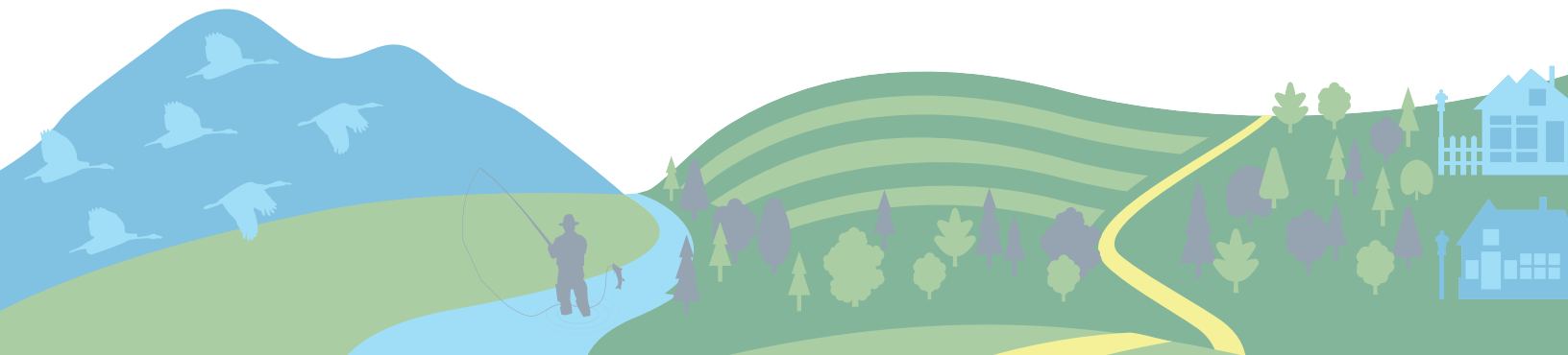
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VERMONT CONSERVATION PLAN **DRAFT FRAMEWORK**