

TO: House Appropriations Committee

FROM: Terri L. Williams

DATE: March 15, 2023

RE: All Member Hearing on FY24 Budget

Dear Chair Lanpher,

Please support Vermont's 14 Natural Resources Conservation Districts with an increase in base funding for the Vermont Natural Resources Conservation Council (NRCC) for a total base appropriation of \$3,000,000. This is an increase of \$2,638,000 to help address chronic underfunding of Vermont's Natural Resources Conservation Districts, which were established in statute over 80 years ago following the Dust Bowl and level funded for decades until last year when they received a small increase of \$250,000. While this increase was a step in the right direction, there is still a significant need.

Vermont's Natural Resources Conservation Districts are trusted and effective members of the agricultural and conservation community. They are subdivisions of government that serve every town and city across Vermont, helping landowners make conservation practice decisions that help steward our land and water resources for the future.

Conservation District Managers and staff are on the ground, hosting meetings, making phone calls, taking soil samples and testing water quality, walking with folks on their property to plan a project, and making sure the work gets done. Your favorite outdoor place has likely benefited from the work of the conservation districts. As critical members of the state's conservation and environmental delivery system, Conservation Districts have been asked to take on a wide range of new initiatives in recent years, and increased state appropriations are needed for Districts to effectively meet their statutory obligations and increased demand.

I attended an event hosted by the Essex and Caledonia County Conservation Districts this past Fall, where we toured a stormwater project site in downtown St. Johnsbury. Stormwater runoff is one of the many program areas that Conservation Districts specialize in, and this project will help prevent sediment runoff going directly into the Passumpsic River when it rains, helping to improve regional water quality in St. Johnsbury. This is a project that would not get done without the work of local conservation districts, as it required bringing together many different stakeholders and connecting them to various different resources. This is what our conservation districts do - they make the connections happen at the hyper local level to successfully implement projects that protect our natural resources.

Currently, each District Manager writes and manages dozens of grants just to cover their salaries and operational costs due to serious underfunding from the state. Until last year, each District was only receiving \$8,000 per year from the state to carry out their statutory obligations. Last year we increased their base funding to \$362,000, resulting in about \$20,000 per District. Providing adequate funding from the state will help alleviate the administrative burden of piecemealing together multiple grants to cover operational costs, freeing up their deliverable-dependent grant funding to be focused on project implementation and therefore strengthening their services on the ground.

The House Agriculture, Food Resiliency & Forestry Committee supported this funding request in their budget memo to this Committee, and I am also asking for your support. Please increase base funding for the Vermont Natural Resources Conservation Council by \$2,638,000 for a total base appropriation of \$3 million.

Terri L. Williams

Essex/Caledonia