



Clean water. Healthy habitat. Thriving communities.

**Connecticut River
Conservancy**



Vermont Council

February 29, 2024

House Committee on Appropriations
Vermont State House
115 State Street
Montpelier, VT 05633

Dear Chair Lanpher and Members of the Committee,

The undersigned organizations, together as members of the Water Caucus, write to provide comments on the Governor's FY25 Proposed Budget as well as offer recommendations regarding the allocation of funds in support of clean water and flood resilience programs. Foremost, we ask the Committee to support robust funding for S.213, 'the Flood Safety Act' when it comes from the Senate, as well as several of the Governor's provisions on clean water infrastructure and resilience.

As Vermont recovers from the July and December 2023 flooding and prepares for the inevitable next event, it is important that the state focus on flood resilience. We understand that state and federal funding is limited this year, and the Committee is making tough choices on spending, but Vermont appears to be on a precipice of increasingly frequent climate-related flooding events and the state is inadequately prepared.

First and foremost, although the bill is still in the Senate, our organizations write in support of the appropriations needed to implement S.213, the 'Flood Safety Act.' Even though it has not yet gone through the House Committee process, it is important that the funding requirements of this bill are considered as other budget decisions are made.

S.213 will benefit our communities through a suite of strategies to reduce flood risks: wetland restoration, better regulating development in high-hazard river corridors, and updating jurisdiction and enforcement tools for dam safety. For the legislation to be properly and swiftly implemented, several programs within the Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC)

will need increased staffing. The current version of the bill requests 16 full-time equivalents (FTEs), based on the latest request by the Agency of Natural Resources (ANR). We believe some of those staff can be brought on in future years, but we do need to increase DEC staffing for these programs in FY25 to make critical progress on these flood resilience initiatives.

Our organizations also offer support for several of the Governor's FY25 Budget recommendations to provide clean water to Vermonters or assist in future planning for flood resiliency and protection. These include:

- \$4 million in one-time funding for the Healthy Homes Initiative to provide grants to low-income Vermonters to repair and replace failed on-site wastewater and drinking water systems. While the past two years saw a significant investment of federal funds in this program, it is our understanding that the need still exists and must be addressed.
- \$1 million for the Unsafe Dam Revolving Loan Fund to provide loans to dam owners for emergency repairs. While the overall cost for dam repairs is estimated to be between \$20 and \$70 million, this is a start that will address the most urgent needs.
- \$500,000 to provide state-match for federal funds from the Water Resources Development Act to evaluate and prioritize future flood measures in the Winooski River watershed basin.

Additionally, we wanted to note that some members of the Legislature are concerned that agricultural fairs cannot afford to meet the requirements of General Permit 3-9050, the "Three Acre General Permit," to limit stormwater discharge from their facilities. To clarify, this permit is currently only required in the Lake Champlain and Lake Memphremagog watersheds and will not be required in the rest of the state until 2033. Regardless, we suggest that the Agency of Agriculture, Food & Markets (AAFM) be directed to work with the fairs to address water quality issues and consider using monies provided in the Clean Water Fund AAFM Water Quality Grants to Partners and Farmers to address the issue. For FY25, \$8.66 million was requested in the Governor's budget for this program and this is an appropriate use for those funds. This allows us to maintain the 'all in' approach that is essential for addressing water quality, and which underpins the success of the Vermont Clean Water Act.

Finally, we understand that the Committee is closely monitoring ANR's encumbrance and expenditure of federal funds from the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA). If funds become available during the budget process, we ask that the Committee strongly consider appropriating more funding for clean water programs, particularly the upgrading of Combined Sewer Overflow systems in order to reduce the discharge of pathogens and other pollutants into Vermont waters during heavy precipitation events.

Our organizations thank the Chair and members of the House Appropriations Committee for your consideration of these requests.

Sincerely,

Lori Fisher, Executive Director
Lake Champlain Committee

Kathy Urffer, River Steward
Connecticut River Conservancy

Lauren Hierl, Executive Director
Vermont Conservation Voters

Jared Carpenter, Acting Chair
Vermont Council of Trout Unlimited

Jon Groveman, Water and Policy Program Director
Vermont Natural Resources Council

cc: Rep. Amy Sheldon, Chair, House Committee on Environment & Energy