

January 30, 2024

Testimony of Karina Dailey, Vice Chair, Lake Champlain Citizens Advisory Committee (CAC)

Invest in Natural and Developed Infrastructure for Resilience – Priority of the Lake Champlain CAC’s Action Plan

We need to expand our thinking beyond the health of our Lakes and drinking water to the rivers, wetlands and floodplain ecosystems that sustain and connect us. We need to be thinking at the watershed scale, from the mountains to the lake, our connected rivers and wetlands provide a sponge for flood events, a filter for pollutants, a home for wildlife. Restoring the river system now will improve community resilience and public safety by restoring natural stream function and giving us the clean, cold water that we need. Healthy, intact freshwater systems build climate resilience.

The weather conditions over the past 6 months has only further reinforced the long-term impacts of climate change and our needed commitment to flood mitigation and resilience. Weather data from flood impacts on July 9 and 10th show over 4.5” of precipitation over 2 days, the lake received more than 200 billion gallons of water, the amount of Phosphorus delivered was more than ½ of the annual TMDL, 33 municipal WW systems were impacted and 19 community water systems and the Lake level reached 98.3 ft on July 23. Then on December 18, we had another significant event – Lake level increased by an additional 2 ft.

We know that climate change is causing more variable precipitation and severe flooding, posing risks to public safety, infrastructure, property, and water quality. Restoration and protection of Lake Champlain’s headwaters, river corridors, floodplains, wetlands, and riparian buffers are cost-effective resilience strategies that also help to achieve clean water and ecological health co-benefits.

Legislative action is needed to support natural flood mitigation, through wetlands conservation, the restoration of stream function and river reconnection – including dam removal – to slow the flow and attenuate flood risk and enhance community resilience. We need an improved statewide approach to protecting our watersheds.

- The CAC endorses full staffing of the Vermont Rivers Program and organizations working to implement river restoration and protection. In addition, the State must prioritize investments that support adaptive, resilient, and compact settlement and help Vermont communities, particularly those vulnerable to climate-related severe weather events.

Failing wastewater facilities and septic systems threaten water quality and public health. To counter these threats, the State needs to improve failing municipal systems and provide more proactive education, oversight, and outreach to homeowners about their septic systems. The CAC encourages the State to:

- Explore an Emergency Response Loan Fund as a means to help cover costs related to wastewater failures and fully support funding of the State Revolving Loan program.

Other recommendations include:

- Encourage expanding eligibility of the treasurer's 10% in Vermont program to include wastewater treatment facilities as an eligible area for investment as it relates to economic development. The State can't grow without right-sized infrastructure.
- Make the Flood Resilient Communities fund permanent at a \$5 million annual appropriation. This would provide a funding opportunity for projects and work not eligible to be covered by FEMA.
- The property transfer tax is sunseting and if not renewed would leave a massive hole in clean water funding.

Thank you for your time.