

## Natural Resources Conservation Districts

*Information regarding the history of NRCD funding and recent past state appropriations*

### Brief History of Vermont's Natural Resources Conservation Districts

The Vermont State Natural Resources Conservation Council (NRCC) was established in 1939 under Vermont's [Soil Conservation Act](#), in response to the Dust Bowl. Vermont's 14 Natural Resources Conservation Districts (NRCD) are governmental subdivisions that were established by landowners through the petitioning process laid out in the Soil Conservation Act, and they operate under the authority of the NRCC to assist in the implementation of conservation practices at the local level.

If you are interested in learning more about the history of Conservation Districts, please [click here](#) to read an interview with Philip Glick, who was an Undersecretary of Agriculture under President Franklin Roosevelt (FDR). Glick was largely responsible for drafting the standard federal Soil Conservation District law which FDR promoted to state Governors in his famous letter of 1937, in which FDR noted that the Nation that destroys its soil, destroys itself. This federal legislation acted as a model for each state to adopt in response to the Dust Bowl.

**Conservation Districts exist in every U.S. State and Territory and are often funded through county level government or state tax revenues.** Unfortunately, Vermont Conservation Districts do not receive adequate funding through state or municipal appropriations, and our potential is limited by a lack of resources.

### State Funding for Vermont's NRCDs

State appropriations are dispersed to Vermont's 14 NRCDs through the NRCC line item within the Vermont Agency of Agriculture, Food & Markets' budget. Currently, this funding is the only source of state funding that specifically provides for the operational and organizational infrastructure required for the State NRCC and the 14 NRCDs to deliver the core services mandated by Vermont State Statute: 10 V.S.A Chapter 31, [Vermont's Soil Conservation Act](#).

[10 V.S.A. 31 §706](#) states that NRCC shall allocate funding among the districts "in such amounts as shall be fair, reasonable, and in the public interest" with due consideration given to "the greater relative expense of carrying on operations, the volume of work to be done, and the special importance of instituting conservation operations immediately." However, **prior to our recent engagement in the legislative process, NRCC's base budget was level funded at \$112,000 for decades.**

This resulted in systemic and consistent underfunding of Vermont's NRCDs, which led to our current budgetary situation of each District writing and managing many different grants just to sustain operations and programming. This funding model has been unsustainable and led to high staff turnover and burnout, reducing our capacity to meet our statutory obligations and expand conservation programming and implementation. Funding from grants is limited, inconsistent, and does not offer secure finances for long-term organizational stability and planning.

As a result, **District Managers' ability to spend time managing District operations and on-the-ground work is directly restricted by the need to perpetually identify and apply for funding from various sources.** Because District functions are limited to the specifications of the various grants, districts do not have the flexibility to purchase much needed equipment and software for our programming and projects. Further District Managers struggle to pursue new programs or expand existing programs.

### FY25 Budget Request

Since calendar year 2022, Vermont's NRCDs have approached the General Assembly with a request to increase our base funding to \$3,000,000 **to meet the increased demand that we are experiencing as a direct result of state policy and goals.** Sec. B.225.2 of the Governor's recommended FY25 Budget includes a base appropriation of \$500,000 in state general funds to NRCC. While we acknowledge that the increase from \$500,000 to \$3,000,000 is significant, it represents real need and the backfilling of decades of chronic underfunding.

**Leveraging Federal Dollars: A \$3,000,000 base budget for NRCC will have a double impact, as we currently have operational capacity to leverage state dollars to draw down federal funds.** Conservation Districts receive roughly half of our funding from the state and half from federal grants, but we are often limited in our ability to draw down federal funding due to a lack of matching state funds.

The \$3,000,000 requested would not replace the majority of grants Districts currently receive to implement projects on the ground. This funding would allow Conservation Districts and the NRCC to retain and recruit skilled staff, engage with their communities in a more meaningful way, provide the state mandated \$50 per diem to all Board members, make necessary facility upgrades, and build capacity. This funding is for management and administration, needs assessments, and community outreach and engagement, which is critical for successful operations and difficult to fund with project-based grant funding. A \$3,000,000 base appropriation will allow us to expand our work, while still relying on all the grants we currently receive to implement programs.

### **FY24 Appropriations - How increased funding has been spent to date**

Each year, the Legislature has responded to our request with a base increase of \$250,000. While this funding has helped significantly, there is still a large gap between what we currently receive in state funds and the need. Last year's increase enabled us to increase the core funding for each District to \$20,000 per year. Here's a sample of how Conservation Districts have used that money:

#### **Caledonia County NRCD**

- Upgraded to Quickbooks Online and moved to online tracking systems for payroll and bills
- Hired a full-time agricultural staff person in May 2023 (a new resident of St. Johnsbury)
- Adopted a pay schedule and provided salary increases to both staff

*"Establishing our new online financial systems has greatly increased our efficiency and will allow us to more easily engage in long-term financial planning" - Caledonia NRCD District Manager*

#### **Essex County NRCD**

- Hired a local professional bookkeeper and an agricultural specialist
- Upgraded our financial tracking system
- Matched additional grant funding

*"Both the new bookkeeper and new financial tracking system have greatly increased our efficiency. The increased appropriation, paired with additional grant funding, also allowed us to hire an agricultural specialist to assist farms in our district. This new employee also manages our conservation tree and shrub nursery, which fills a badly needed gap in tree availability in Vermont. **We also used our appropriation to apply to a number of state, federal, and private grants for projects.** This includes a \$1.5 million dollar project to improve stream crossing structures in the county; \$300,000 to hire a new staff member that would train local contractors and road crews to control invasive species in our area for several years; and a number of other grants to do specific projects to improve flood resilience, water quality, and wildlife habitat in our county." - Essex NRCD District Manager*

#### **Franklin County NRCD**

- Compensated our Board of Supervisors for their time and travel to monthly board meetings
- Expanded our staff from 2 FTE in 2021 to 5 FTE in 2024
- Reimbursed staff for mileage to attend more night and weekend events
- Responded more quickly to constituent and community requests that do not fall into covered grant deliverables for things such as flood response and streambank erosion threatening properties
- Purchased additional computers for growing staff to use

*"Additional state funding has given our district the confidence to expand our team, which was much needed to meet the demand we experience. These funds have enabled us to better participate in statewide initiatives and working groups with other NRCDs such as bimonthly meetings where District Managers share ideas, collaborate on projects, and improve efficiencies. Previously, we relied on NRCS vehicles to travel, but we don't have access to those outside of typical work*

*hours, so the additional funds have helped our staff attend more professional development events and opportunities to collaborate with partners through mileage reimbursement for personal vehicle use.” - Franklin NRCD District Manager*

#### **Grand Isle County NRCD**

- Transitioned the District Manager from part-time to full-time, including setting up payroll systems, creating an employee handbook that includes policies on health insurance stipends, PTO, etc.
- Engaged in activities that are not currently grant funded: water quality testing through the LaRosa Partnership Program, property site visits, responding to community needs, etc.
- Designated more staff time for project development and grant writing

#### **Orleans County NRCD**

- Purchased a variety of outreach materials and equipment
- Transitioned to Quickbooks online
- Increased all staff salaries by 15% to improve staff retention
- Hired additional staff
- Purchased tree planting tools – water pump and professional shovels
- Purchased a drone for field assessments
- Purchase office equipment – a laptop and bag and external drives for all staff
- Provided stipends to Board members for participating in strategic planning

*“Increased state funding has allowed our District Manager and other staff to better respond to partners and landowners’ requests for assistance that do not easily fall under our current grants. Our increased staffing has also greatly helped the District Manager to focus more on district operations, and engage more with NRCC and VACD staff on program consistencies and visioning.” - Orleans NRCD District Manager*

#### **Ottawaquechee NRCD**

- Hired a new District Manager with increased hours (from 40 hours per month to 30 hours per week)
- Hired an accounting firm
- Purchased a payroll service to relieve those duties from the District Manager.

*“In the past we were not able to consider hiring a full-time Conservation District Manager for our District, but the increase in funding has made it possible to consider hiring a full time District Manager and we hope to make this position full time soon. The full-time manager will allow the district to develop more projects to preserve and protect the water quality in the district. In addition, we will be able to provide more assistance and outreach to landowners and support our educational efforts. Engaging the services of an accounting firm and a payroll service have allowed us to operate more efficiently and keep better control on our finances.” - Ottawaquechee NRCD District Manager*

#### **Poultney Mettowee NRCD**

- Provided increased benefits to our staff, including small increases in health care stipends
- Instituted a Simple IRA program with 2% contributions for all permanent staff
- Provided 50% of wages for three months for two staff on maternity leave (the first maternity leave benefits offered by our District in living memory)
- Contributed to our hiring of two new staff positions.

*“I can not stress how important these funds were in terms of helping us have the confidence we needed to hire much needed new staff. One new staff member is an assistant at our native plant nursery, who helps with the tree sale, tree plantings, tree propagation, and other general nursery and tree planting tasks. This same staff person also assists with water quality data management, report writing, and general grant assistance in the winter months. The other new staff member assists the District Manager with their backlog of grant reports, outreach to landowners, reporting, and keeping a myriad of grant tasks organized and on track. This staff position will eventually include community outreach and education and will make annual visits to select boards, planning commissions, and conservation commissions to update them about new programs and opportunities for project implementation and to provide them with technical support, as needed. This position will include DEI aspects and will attempt to broaden outreach within the District to groups that are not always heard in public forums.” - Poultney Mettowee NRCD District Manager*

### **Rutland NRCD**

- Increased District Manager pay to bring compensation in alignment with comparable NRCDs
- Purchased a new laptop and the newest version of QuickBooks
- Designated more staff time for project development and grant writing

### **Windham NRCD**

- Hired a Conservation Specialist for the district in January of 2023
- Improved pay and benefits for district staff to improve staff retention
- Provided support to the aquatic invasive species public access greeter program at Harriman Reservoir, where no local funding exists. **We used \$2,400 in core funding to match grant funding at this site.**
- Take on an expanded role in the Southeast Vermont CISMA (Cooperative Invasive Species Management Association), which led to successful grant applications that **brought in more than \$15,000 in funding** for invasive species education, outreach and control efforts over the past two years.
- Additional professional development for district staff
- Expanded our leadership role in the Locally led conservation process, which has enabled us to hold additional public forums soliciting public input into funding decisions at NRCS and VAAFM
- Offered stipends to farmers who host or present at workshops.

*“Our new staff position has greatly increased the district’s capacity to develop and pursue restoration projects (trees for streams, floodplain restoration, stormwater projects, etc) and has also made it possible for us to take on a greater role in public outreach. With our increased state funding, we have brought in more than \$18,000 in additional grant funding, allowing us to expand our leadership role in local conservation efforts and develop new partnerships that include the Vermont River Conservancy, and the Brattleboro and Marlboro Conservation Commissions.” - Windham NRCD District Manager*

### **Winooski NRCD**

- Supported the hire of a new District Manager
- Partly funded flood recovery work
- Purchased new Lenovo Thinkpad laptops, monitors, mouse and keyboards for District Manager and Conservation Specialist to allow for remote work
- Purchased a dozen new shovels, work gloves and 1 utility water pump to enhance our efficiency in tree planting

*“Our new equipment has helped us enhance riparian buffers in our District, which are critical to increasing flood resilience, maintaining water quality, and benefiting wildlife. The water pump we purchased will allow for staff to adequately water the bare root trees we plant, increasing the likelihood of survival.” -Winooski NRCD District Manager*