



Vermont Association of Conservation Districts

Our Land. Our Water. Our Future.

TO: Vermont Senate Committee on Appropriations
FROM: Vermont Association of Conservation Districts
RE: FY24 Budget
DATE: April 19, 2023

Dear Chair Kitchel,

Vermont's 14 Natural Resources Conservation Districts respectfully submit this memo to help answer questions that have come up in your Committee about our [FY24 Budget Request](#). As your Committee continues its work on the FY24 Budget, we hope you will keep our funding request in mind and support increasing the base for Vermont's Natural Resources Conservation Council within the VT Agency of Agriculture and Food Market's budget. Ongoing funding is critical for Vermont's Conservation Districts to carry out our statutory obligations of protecting natural resources in the state of Vermont. Please do not hesitate to reach out with any questions or requests for further information.

DEC Grants to Watershed Groups

There was a question about grants flowing from the Clean Water Fund to watershed groups, and how that relates to our request. Vermont's 14 Natural Resources Conservation Districts support the watershed group's request for funding from the Clean Water Fund (CWF), and we also want to highlight that we differ from nonprofit community partners who provide similar services (watershed groups) because Conservation Districts are subdivisions of state government, not nonprofits.

Conservation Districts were established in federal legislation and subsequently in Vermont's [Soil Conservation Act](#) as a response to the Dust Bowl in the 1930s. We operate under the authority of the Vermont Natural Resources Conservation Council (NRCC) which is a designated "agency of the state" under 10 V.S.A. § 703. Each District has a Board of Supervisors who are all local residents elected by the public to that position. There are over 3,000 Conservation Districts in the United States, and we have a historical working relationship with the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service.

Current CWF Grant Amounts to Conservation Districts

Much of the state funding Conservation Districts currently receive comes from the Clean Water Fund in the form of **competitive grants for specific projects and programs**. In FY22, Vermont's 14 Natural Resources Conservation Districts received a total of **\$798,000** from competitive CWF grants through NRCC.

Table 1. Breakdown of Competitive CWF Grant Funding to Conservation Districts, FY22

| Grant | # of Districts that Received Grant | TOTAL Paid to Districts in FY22 |
|--------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------|
| Tactical Basin Planning | 14 | \$162,000 |
| Agriculture Clean Water Investment Program | 12 | \$329,000 |
| Project Development Block Grant | 7 | \$31,000 |
| Design & Implementation Block Grant | 7 | \$237,000 |
| Woody Buffer Block Grant | 4 | \$39,000 |

In addition to the grants listed above, the NRCC received **\$179,000** for CWF grant administration, oversight, and capacity-building support in FY22. It is important to note that much of the CWF monies to Conservation Districts are passed on to contractors for restoration projects. For example, Design & Implementation Block Grants show a high dollar value granted to Districts on paper, but the majority of that money goes out the door immediately to contractors for engineering and construction costs.

Challenges with the Clean Water Fund

CWF funding is very important to us, but our work encompasses far more than water quality, and our greatest need is for dedicated, ongoing operational funding. Accordingly, our request for appropriations in FY24 is an increase to the NRCC base. The existing \$362,000 in the NRCC line item helps Vermont’s 14 Conservation Districts offset the cost of basic administration and statutory obligations – like conducting board meetings, paying Supervisor per diems, and running elections – but barely scratches the surface of other basic needs, such as needs assessments, operational expense, organizational management, supplies and equipment, community outreach & engagement to inform landowners of regulations as well as to inform state policy development, and time spent responding to constituent needs. In order to backfill this funding gap, Districts have patched together increasing numbers of competitive, project-based grants, but the administrative burden associated with this piecemeal approach is high. **With a dedicated appropriation from a Special Fund for a specified purpose (CWF), we do not escape the time-consuming application, reporting requirements and deliverables of grant funding.**

We are extremely grateful to the Senate Appropriations Committee for trying to think creatively about how to increase funding for Vermont’s Conservation Districts. However, in order to move us closer to our goal of foundational funding for our full range of activities, it is our strong preference to have NRCC’s base increase come from state general funds.

\$1,000,000 in One-Time Funding in the House FY24 Budget

Your Committee had questions about the breakdown of the \$1M in one-time funding that is included in the House budget. Below is a table that shows the breakdown of the House appropriation. **The Conservation Districts have the capacity to spend these monies at current staffing levels.** We do intend to improve compensation and benefits for existing staff with part of the one-time funding for the upcoming fiscal year in order to retain their professional staff. We acknowledge that we can only plan for one fiscal year with one-time funding.

Table 2. Breakdown of \$1M One-Time Funding Included in House FY24 Budget

| | |
|-------------------------------------------|--------------------|
| Core Conservation District Services | \$412,000 |
| Agricultural Resource Specialist Training | \$50,000 |
| Community Engagement and Outreach | \$200,000 |
| Board and Supervisor Compensation | \$20,000 |
| Equipment and Facility Upgrades | \$98,000 |
| Conservation District Leadership Expense | \$20,000 |
| Capacity Development and Overhead | \$200,000 |
| Total One-Time funding | \$1,000,000 |

Other Core Services of Vermont’s Natural Resources Conservation Districts

Vermont’s 14 Conservation Districts fill different niches in different parts of the state. We provide a wide range of services to communities and work directly with landowners to implement water quality *and other* conservation projects on the ground. It is important to note that Conservation Districts are program implementers - we are the boots on the ground taking soil samples, transporting manure samples, planting trees, nutrient management planning, finding new projects, etc. Some niches that we fill include:

- **Technical Assistance & Program Navigation to the Agricultural Community** - We provide a wide range of natural resource protection services to farm businesses. When working with a farm or landowner, we are primarily focused on the sustainability of the land and the health of the local ecosystem, while supporting the viability of the farm operation. We help farmers navigate the wide range of programs available from federal and state agencies to address natural resource concerns and to protect soil and water quality. We help farmers complete funding applications for these programs, as well as carry out the assessments and planning needed to implement those programs, such as sample soils, collect and transport manure samples, educate farmers about regulatory requirements, and prepare Nutrient Management Plans.
- **Tree Plantings to Strengthen and Protect Riparian Corridors** - Many Conservation Districts conduct tree planting operations to protect riparian corridors within their Districts. Riparian corridors are critical habitats for preventing soil erosion and protecting against flooding and adverse climate impacts.
- **Invasive Species** - Multiple Districts are working with the USDA-NRCS developing local funding pools to initiate grants to landowners to eradicate invasive species on their properties.
- **Energy Conservation** - In 2023, the Orange and Windsor County Local Working Group, chaired by the White River NRCD, launched a \$30,000 local fund pool to conduct farm energy audits, via the NRCS EQIP program. Next year this funding pool may expand to include energy improvement implementation funding.
- **River, Floodplain and Lakeshore Restoration Projects** - Conservation Districts implement a wide range of river, floodplain, and lakeshore restoration projects such as culvert replacements, bridge and dam removals, gully erosion mitigation, and lakeshore bioengineering.

- **Stormwater Runoff Projects** - District stormwater projects range from small rain gardens and school-parking lots to road improvements and major downtown remediation projects. For example, the Caledonia County Conservation District designed and implemented a \$456,000 project on North Main Street in downtown Hardwick that treated 31 acres of stormwater drainage with 9.3 acres of impervious surface. Many Conservation Districts hold community forums to gather public input on town stormwater projects.
- **Regional Water Quality** - Conservation Districts work in their local watersheds to improve local water quality. Most Districts serve on Basin Water Quality Councils, often serving as either Chair or Vice Chair of these Councils. The Poultney Mettowee Natural Resources Conservation District serves in partnership with the Rutland Regional Planning Commission as that region's Clean Water Service Provider. 10 Conservation Districts provide Lake Wise evaluations that lead to Lake Wise certification.
 - **Vermont Agricultural Water Quality Partnership** - The Vermont Association of Conservation Districts and all 14 Natural Resources Conservation Districts are part of the [Vermont Agricultural Water Quality Partnership](#), which is a formal partnership with an MOU signed between ourselves, USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service, USDA Farm Service Agency, US Fish & Wildlife Service, UVM Extension, Vermont Department of Environmental Conservation, Vermont Agency of Agriculture, Food & Markets, the Vermont Housing & Conservation Board, and the Lake Champlain Basin Program. That partnership has a framework at the state level and local level to collaborate and coordinate efforts, and Conservation Districts hold that framework at the local level as regional coordinators.
- **Pay for Performance Program** - Conservation Districts have a contract with VAAF to implement the new Pay for Performance program at the local level, which is a natural continuation of our role of connecting the farmers in our communities to opportunities to reduce phosphorus and build soil health.
- **Community Outreach & Engagement** - Vermont's Conservation Districts represent community members and landowners in advising government agencies in the development of natural resources programs and policies through Local Work Groups with on-the-ground stakeholders. These local work groups are intended to inform state and federal policies.

Please see the table in Appendix A to see which Districts offer which conservation programs, many of which are beyond water quality and supported by program specific grant funding.

Thank you again for your consideration. We are happy to answer any further questions.

Sincerely,



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**APPENDIX A – Vermont Natural Resources Conservation Districts
Program Activities 2023**

| <p align="center">Vermont Natural Resources Conservation Districts Program Activities 2023</p> <p align="center">X = District offers this service O = A nearby District offers this service in this region</p> | | Bennington County NRCD | Caledonia County NRCD | Essex County NRCD | Franklin County NRCD | Grand Isle NRCD | Lamoille County NRCD | Orleans County NRCD | Ottawa County NRCD | Otter Creek NRCD | Poultney Mettowee NRCD | Rutland NRCD | White River NRCD | Windham County NRCD | Winooski NRCD |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------|-----------------------|-------------------|----------------------|-----------------|----------------------|---------------------|--------------------|------------------|------------------------|--------------|------------------|---------------------|---------------|
| | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Natural Resources Conservation & Restoration | Conduct Local Need Assessments | | | | X | X | X | X | | | X | X | X | X | X |
| | Draft Conservation Action Plans | | | | | | X | X | | | | | X | X | |
| | Assist DEC's Tactical Basin Planning Program | X | X | X | X | X | X | X | X | X | X | X | X | X | X |
| | Tree Planting (Private Land) | X | X | X | X | X | X | X | X | X | X | X | X | X | X |
| | Tree Planting (Public Land) | X | X | X | X | X | X | X | X | | X | X | X | X | X |
| | Tree Sales | | | X | X | | X | X | | X | X | X | | X | X |
| | River Clean Up | | | | | | X | X | X | | | | | O | X |
| | Invasive Species Removal/Management | X | | X | | | X | X | | X | X | | | X | X |
| | Aquatic Nuisance Control Grant Facilitation | | | | | | X | | | | | | X | X | |
| | Water Quality Sampling (LaRosa) | X | X | X | X | X | X | X | X | | X | | | O | X |
| | Water Quality Sampling (Private Land) | | | | X | | X | | X | X | | | | O | |
| | Lake Clean Water Action Committees | | | | | | X | | | | X | | X | | |
| | Lake Watershed Action Plans | | | X | | X | X | X | | | | | X | X | X |
| | Lake Wise Shoreline Evaluations | X | X | X | X | X | X | X | | | X | | X | X | X |
| | Shoreline Protection & Restoration Projects | X | X | X | X | X | X | X | | X | X | | X | X | |
| | Recreational Access | X | | | | | X | | X | | X | | | | X |
| | Stream Restoration Projects | X | X | X | X | X | X | X | X | | X | X | X | X | X |
| | Dam Removal Projects | X | X | | X | | X | | | | X | X | X | X | X |
| | Support River Corridor Easements | | | | | | X | | | | | | | X | |
| | Wetland Outreach and Site Identification | | | X | X | X | | X | | | | | X | | |
| Forest and Woodlot Programs | X | | X | X | | X | | X | | X | | X | X | | |
| Skidder Bridge Rental | | | X | | | X | X | | | O | X | | X | | |
| Serve on Basin Water Quality Council (BWQC) | X | X | X | X | X | X | X | | X | X | X | | | X | |
| Chair or Vice Chair BWQC | | | | X | X | X | | | X | | | | | | |
| Serve as Clean Water Service Provider | | | | | | | | | | X | | | | X | |
| Support Conservation Commission Meetings | | | X | | X | X | X | | | | | | X | X | |
| Education & Outreach | Educational Programs (Schools) | | | X | X | | X | X | X | | | | X | X | |
| | Educational Programs (Kids) | | | | X | | X | X | X | X | X | X | X | X | |
| | Educational Programs (Adults) | X | | | X | | X | X | X | | X | X | X | X | |
| | Envirothon Outreach | | | | | | X | X | | | | X | X | X | |
| | Volunteer Opportunities | X | | X | X | X | X | | X | X | X | | X | X | |
| | Community Science | X | | | | X | X | | | | X | | X | X | |
| | Regional Administrator for Public Access Greeter Programs | | | | | | | | | | | | X | X | |
| | Natural Resource Assessments for Towns/Municipalities | | X | X | | | | | X | | X | X | X | X | |
| | Grant Application Assistance for Towns/Municipalities | X | X | X | X | | X | X | X | | X | | X | X | |
| Grant Application Assistance for Watershed Groups/Nonprofits | | | | | | | | X | | | | X | X | | |
| Stormwater Remediation | Stormwater Projects | X | X | X | X | X | X | X | | X | X | X | X | X | |
| | Roads Projects | | X | X | X | X | X | X | | X | | | O | X | |
| | Hazard Mitigation Plan implementation | | | X | | | X | | | | | | X | | |
| Agriculture | Soil & Manure Sampling | X | X | X | X | O | X | X | O | X | X | O | X | X | |
| | RAPs Education and Outreach | X | X | X | X | O | X | X | X | X | X | O | X | X | |
| | Nutrient Management Planning (NMPs) | X | X | X | X | O | X | X | O | X | X | O | X | X | |
| | Conservation Planning for NRCS implementation | | X | | X | O | X | X | O | | | | X | X | |
| | Technical Assistance for Ag BMP Implementation | O | X | X | X | O | X | X | O | | X | O | X | X | |
| | Technical Assistance for VT Pay for Phosphorus (Performance) Program | | | | X | | | X | | X | | | | X | |
| | Application/Grant-writing Assistance for Farmers | O | X | X | X | O | X | X | O | | X | O | X | X | |
| | Plan Locally-led Funding Pools (NRCS) | | | | X | X | X | X | | | | | X | X | |
| | Technical Assistance for Conservation Easements | | X | X | X | | X | X | X | | X | | | X | |
| | Coordinate Farm Management Teams | | | | | | | X | | | | | X | X | |
| | Equipment Rental | O | | O | | | X | X | | | X | O | X | X | |
| | Food Access | X | | | | | X | | | | | | X | | |
| | Serve as Regional Coordinator for VT Ag WQ Partnership | X | | | X | | X | X | | | X | | X | | |
| | Chair Local Working Group to Inform NRCS Programs | | | | X | X | X | X | O | X | X | X | X | X | |
| Farmers Watershed Alliance Coordination | | | | | | | | | X | | | X | | | |