

Testimony: Watersheds United Vermont to
The House Committee on Natural Resources, Fish and Wildlife.
March 30, 2018
Lyn Munno, Director, Watersheds United Vermont

Thank you Representative Deen and the House Committee on Natural Resources, Fish and Wildlife. My name is Lyn Munno and I'm the Director of Watersheds United Vermont. I had spoken with this Committee as part of Clean Water Day at the end of February. I have now been asked to provide testimony on the importance of sustainable funding as it relates to S260. I will briefly discuss the importance of clean water funding and give my thoughts on how S260 can be strengthened to accomplish clean water goals.

Just a quick reminder of who we are: Watersheds United Vermont (WUV) is an association of community-based watershed groups with a mission to empower watershed groups in all parts of the state to protect and restore Vermont's waters. We support groups by providing information, training and resources, connecting groups to each other and to partner organizations and acting as a representative and a voice for watershed groups at the state level. WUV has 40-member community-based organizations across the state including Conservation Districts.

You heard from several watershed groups on Clean Water Day including The White River Partnership, Connecticut River Conservancy, Trout Unlimited, Friends of the Mad River and the Memphremagog Watershed Alliance. They talked about the importance of funding for watershed protection and restoration activities including stormwater management, riparian buffer planting, water quality monitoring, agriculture and forestry projects, dam removal and culvert replacement projects, river cleanups, education and outreach and participating in municipal, regional and state planning efforts including Tactical Basin Planning.

We all know the critical importance of clean water for this state and we need to commit to invest in our waters and our communities. Our community-based watershed groups know better than anyone that there is real work to do on the ground right now to achieve clean water goals. They understand the importance of working in their communities with landowners, municipalities, partner organizations and state partners to implement projects to improve water quality, address flood resilience and protect and restore important habitat.

These projects are often complex and take time to develop, time to scope the priority projects, time to do education in their communities and outreach to specific landowners, time to design different stages of projects and time to implement projects on the ground – be it a riparian buffer planting, a culvert project, a rain garden, a dam removal or a river corridor easement. This can take several years and these projects are not possible without a commitment of state funds and a consistency of state funding programs. These state dollars help leverage private dollars from businesses, foundations and individuals as well as federal dollars.

We need to establish a long term-stable funding source for clean water now. We are asking the house to strengthen S260 to commit to a funding mechanism and source with sufficient funds. One of the biggest barriers to groups in implementing projects is not knowing whether dollars will be available for the next stage of a project and landowners and partners need consistent funding to invest time and money in these critical watershed protection projects to see them to completion. We have serious concerns that if the Legislature waits until next year to establish a funding source and funding mechanism just as the funds are due to expire, that there will be a gap and missed opportunities as groups wait to see what funding programs will be in place to achieve our clean water obligations and goals. We know that to meet our clean water goals and obligations under the TMDLs and Vermont Clean Water Act, we need to ramp up our work, not have a period of uncertainty and inaction. We already have more projects than we have funding for, and as Treasurer Pearce's study concluded, we need additional funds, not diminished or uncertain funds to achieve clean water and healthy watersheds in Vermont.

There are a few other critical pieces to make sure that the appropriate funds and programs are available through S260. I had mentioned these in my testimony in February and want to quickly emphasize their importance. We need non-capital dollars in addition to capital dollars. It is key to have enough funding for project scoping and development, landowner outreach, education and implementation of projects that are not capital eligible. We hear time and again from watershed groups that they do not have the funds necessary to do project development and therefore these important projects are not implemented.

It is important to make sure there are sufficient funds for natural resources protection projects, which have been shown as an excellent investment of resources to improve water quality. These projects also provide a host of co-benefits including flood resiliency and habitat protection.

We need funding for capacity building for our community-based watershed groups. Most watershed groups are small groups with limited (or no) staff. We have seen that those groups that have more capacity are able to accomplish significantly more project work, and an investment in local capacity will go a long way toward more on the ground work. There are many important projects identified across the state that will improve water quality and these groups can be key state partners in project management with the staff support and capacity.

In summary, we are asking the Legislature to act now. The studies on funding options have been done. We all know the critical importance of clean water for this state and we need to invest in our waters and our communities. Our community-based watershed groups and other state partners have real work to do on the ground now! But they need a commitment of funds and a consistency of programs to develop and implement projects that will protect Vermont's lakes, ponds, rivers and streams, which are so vital to Vermonters.