

**Bird's Eye Conservation Project
Ira and Poultney, VT
Testimony**

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Strategic Investment in Public Lands on Behalf of Vermonters

The majority of Vermont is held in private ownership (80%). Of the 20% of Vermont that is in some form of conservation, only 7.5% is owned by the State of Vermont, and 3% is owned by the Vermont Fish and Wildlife Department. The mission of the Department is the conservation of fish, wildlife, plants and their habitats for the people of Vermont. In 1920, the Vermont Fish and Wildlife Department began what has become a long, rich history of land acquisition when it acquired what is now known as Sandbar Wildlife Management Area. Today, Department owns over 135,000 acres of land consisting of 90 Wildlife Management Areas (WMAs), 5 fish culture facilities, 2 flag-ship conservation camps that educate approximately 1,000 kids every year, 120 access areas, and hundreds of riparian properties throughout Vermont. In addition, Department holds interest in several thousand acres of other important wildlife habitat and natural communities through more than sixty conservation easements. Many of those easements also provide the public with access for wildlife-based recreation.

Land conservation and management is an essential part of Department's ability to achieve its mission and fully represent the public's interests in fish and wildlife conservation. Lands owned and managed by Department provide important habitat for a wide array of native plants and animals, as well as permanent, guaranteed public access for fish and wildlife-based activities. Public opinion surveys continue to show that public land is very important to Vermonters, and that land specifically owned by the Department is highly valued for outdoor recreation. While the land conserved by Department and others provides outstanding habitat for fish, wildlife, plants and people, there is still much conservation work to be done. Therefore, we need to be strategic and thoughtful with what land we acquire, and mindful of the challenges presented by limited resources to accomplish this important work.

In 1999, the Vermont Agency of Natural Resources developed a plan to guide the conservation of land by all its Departments. The priorities established in that plan were based on an analysis of Agency land ownership at that time and broad public input. Those priorities hold true today and include: 1) recreational values; 2) ecological values; 3) forest resources; and 4) additions to existing Agency lands. In addition to the broad principles and priorities identified in the Agency's plan, Department created a road map for strategic decision-making to further guide land conservation. The need for this refined structure is made evident by the growing array of land conservation opportunities throughout Vermont. With



both limited funding and stewardship capacity, it's critical that the Department make strategic decisions that achieve our priorities.

Establishing focus areas for land acquisition is a useful approach for strategic land acquisition. To accomplish this we considered the following factors:

1. Existing partner conservation efforts (i.e., don't focus resources where other organizations are already working to conserve land);
2. Significant ecological areas (e.g., natural communities, habitats, rare species, overlap with Vermont Conservation Design) unique within the broader context of Vermont biophysical regions;
3. Significant social benefits (e.g., improved public access to wildlife-based activities, public access in areas where such access is limited or there are significant benefits for local economies);
4. Building upon existing significant public investments of conserved land (i.e., areas where the Department already owns significant acreage and it makes sense to continue to expand the conservation ownership for ecological, social, or management reasons);
5. To a certain extent, #4 relates to acquisition of important inholdings within existing WMAs which remains an important consideration (i.e., prioritize acquisition of most critical inholdings for management and access purposes); and
6. Available funding may provide conservation opportunities in certain regions of Vermont that fit the Department's interests (e.g. Vermont Duck Stamp Funds and Federal Funds available to the Department).

The Department identified a number of highly unique areas around Vermont that reflect multiple priority interests of Department which in addition to conservation of Vermont's wildlife includes careful consideration to the impacts on the rural working economy. A total of 11 focus areas were selected to consider expansion or development of WMAs. These areas represent WMAs in all 5 districts, intersecting with at least 6 biophysical regions, and addressing a broad range of public access, habitat management, and ecological benefits and functions. While this may seem to represent a broad set of land acquisition focus areas, it remains important for Department to have flexibility to pursue important conservation opportunities based, in part, on funding and partner-based opportunities.

This background is essential to understand the thought process behind the Department significant investment in acquiring the former 2,875-acre Yankee lands in Poultney and Ira, the largest state land acquisition in more than 15 years ago. The area between the Department's Bird Mountain WMA and Blueberry Hill WMA is one of the 11 focus areas the Department has identified for expansion. Bird Mountain WMA is part of the second largest forest block in the Taconic Mountains and provides a critical wildlife connection to the Green Mountains north of Route 4. The importance of this area from a



wildlife connectivity standpoint is extremely important. In addition to the conservation of the resources, the area is just 6 miles from downtown Rutland providing an unparalleled opportunity for an under-served region of the state to have easy access to an area to hunt, wildlife-watch and hike. Fish and wildlife, through huge participation from people who fish, hunt, wildlife watch in the state generated \$377 million dollars, including almost \$20 million in state tax revenue.

Partnerships

The conservation of these 3,000 acres only happens with significant partnerships, not the least was between the Department and the Conservation Fund early in the process. Land conservation is inherently complicated and expensive. The public of Vermont is lucky in that the network of conservation organizations in Vermont is tight and work closely together to advance the interests of the public. The Department is limited in its capacity to conserve land around the state and we rely heavily on our partners to help us invest in land purchases on behalf of the citizens of Vermont. The Department works with countless partners from our more traditional constituents like local sportsmen's clubs, Ruffed Grouse Society, the Sportsmen Federation and the National Wild Turkey Federation to our land conservation partners like the Conservation Fund, Vermont Land Trust and the Vermont Housing and Conservation Board to maximize our success with conservation and with communities.

A project at this scale would not have been possible without an investment from the Vermont Housing and Conservation Board early in the process. The total budget was approximately \$3.5million dollars with a grant of \$600,000 from the Vermont Housing and Conservation Board. As part of the funding agreement with the Vermont Housing & Conservation Board, a conservation easement was placed on the property. The easement is co-held by the Vermont Land Trust and Vermont Housing and Conservation Board, the entities responsible for ensuring these protections are upheld. It reflects the approach the Fish & Wildlife Department takes towards stewarding this wildlife management area and recognizes the perpetual commitment made by all parties to the future health of this important piece of habitat.

Future of the Land as a Wildlife Management Area

The newly expanded Bird Mountain WMA will serve as an economic engine in central Rutland County for years to come. These lands are popular with hunters, hikers, birdwatchers, and snowmobilers. We expect that the expansion will provide additional recreational opportunities and a year-round boost to regional tourism.

WMAs are land that have been conserved with the specific goal of sustaining fish and wildlife populations, their habitats, as well as for providing opportunities for people to enjoy wildlife-based recreation. Other forms of public lands like State Forests may also promote wildlife habitat, but often are managed for additional land management goals like timber production or recreational trail development. The specific focus of WMAs is what sets them apart and creates unparalleled opportunities for wildlife-based recreation. However, WMAs do more than protect wildlife and provide habitat. They



also provide natural infrastructure that provides a wide array of public services to towns, such as: 1) recharging groundwater supplies; 2) maintaining high water quality by filtering sediments and retaining excess nutrients in flowing waters; and 3) protecting downstream villages from flood damage by slowing and absorbing heavy rains and snow melt.

In addition to access for recreation, the public values of conservation of the Bird's Eye lands are many. The property encompasses upland watersheds and headwaters of the Poultney River, the Castleton River and the Clarendon River, 8.5 miles of headwaters streams and 24.3 acres of state mapped wetlands in addition to numerous vernal pools and forested wetlands. The land is special in its ecology hosting numerous rare and threatened plants and natural communities. The Ames Hollow area within the project displays the greatest diversity of natural communities with Dry Oak Forest, Dry Oak-Hickory-Hophornbeam Forest, Rich Northern Hardwood Forest and White Pine-Red Oak-Black Oak Forest all occurring there. The predominance of red oak in the forests provides an important food source for bears, wild turkey and white-tail deer. The unbroken forest also provides critical habitat, travel corridor and buffer from human habitation and activity, and offers habitat for other free ranging species such as bobcat, fisher, barred owls and bear. The land links to other forested blocks which provide wildlife passage north-south across VT RT 4 along the spine of the Taconic Mountains and east-west between the Taconic Range and Green Mountains.

The Department will manage this land as part of the WMA for all of these resources on behalf of the public. As a WMA, the public will see the benefits of this project on the economy and their quality of life for years to come. It is a privilege to work on behalf of Vermonters with our partners, the Vermont Housing and Conservation Board, Vermont Land Trust and the Conservation Fund.

