

## MEMORANDUM

**TO:** Senate Committee on Natural Resources  
**FROM:** Marli Rupe  
**DATE:** February 15, 2017  
**RE:** S. 43

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The Vermont Agency of Natural Resources recognizes and strongly supports the importance of building healthy soils. Soil health and the practices that improve soil health reduce phosphorus-laden sediment from getting into our waters, increase nutrient and pollution absorption and filtration, increase our adaptability to climate change by increasing soil infiltration, are cost-effective for farmers by improving crop production and for towns and municipalities by decreasing stormwater treatment decreasing runoff and erosion on our backroads.

ANR supports many of the concepts in this bill but feel most are already being addressed in our current and upcoming programs.

- Most of the programs at ANR and the Agency of Agriculture include some aspect of soil health
  1. The Lake Champlain TMDL Phase 1 Plan addresses soil health (RAPs, incentive programs, nmps)
  2. Building soil health is a key part of the AAFM Required Agricultural Practices and agricultural nutrient management.
  3. Section 6.04 of the RAPs is specific to soil health and how conservation practices improve it.
  4. Act 64 requires standards for nutrient management on farms, including recommended practices for improving and maintaining soil quality and healthy soils.
  5. DEC's Regional Conservation Partnership Program and AAFM's Best Management Practices program both provide funds to help producers implement good soil health practices
- There are many other voluntary programs that help farmers implement good soil health practices (cover crops, crop rotations, reduced tillage) – funds from the state and federal government, and sign up has been low. We encourage an effort to increase outreach and information sharing to farmers to access the current programs rather than create a new one.
- The 2017 Stormwater Manual requires through the Post-Construction Soil Depth and Quality Standard, that areas disturbed during development activity (that are subject to a stormwater permit), with some exceptions, will be restored through incorporation of a topsoil mix with specified organic content, essentially a depth of 4" is added, and the area is tilled to 8" to loosen and improve the developed soils. Another option is to protect existing soils from compaction and disturbance.

A program to certify land as regenerative may be duplicative of other efforts.

- The organic certification encourages good soil health practices.
- AAFM is developing an incentive program to reward farmers who take action to exceed regulatory requirements for conservation and water quality practices, which will include an incentive for building soil health (Vermont Environmental Stewardship Program).
  1. Has soil health is part of the assessment (RUSL, NPST test, Cornell soil health test
  2. Includes the NRCS COMET planner tool for greenhouse gas and carbon sequestration
  3. Must meet threshold requirements on at least 90% of land base and have plan for the rest
  4. Includes incentives such as paid soil health tests and recognition (on-farm signage) and is investigating other partnership opportunities and incentive possibilities
- A position of Director of Reg soils would be duplicative of the work that most of the AAFM and DEC employees are currently doing in working with landowners to promote soil management practices and implementing the VESP.
- Any program related to soil health and farming should be within the Agency of Agriculture and not ANR

ANR strongly supports the current programs that improve the health and productivity of the soils of Vermont, increase the carbon sequestration capability of those soils and encourage landowners to increase implementation of practices that promote regenerative soil for all the water quality, climate change and farm sustainability reasons that good soil health provide. We welcome an opportunity to discuss any of these aspects further with the committee.