



David Mears, Executive Director

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**Testimony Regarding the Agency of Natural Resources Budget
Before the Joint Public Hearing on the FY21 State Budget**

- Thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today. My name is David Mears and I am the Executive Director of Audubon Vermont, which is a part of the National Audubon Society. I am presenting my testimony today on behalf of Audubon Vermont alone, but my testimony is informed by my conversations with other environmental organizations including the Vermont Natural Resources Council, Vermont Conservation Voters, Vermont Land Trust, The Nature Conservancy, Conservation Law Foundation, Vermont Public Interest Research Group, Trust for Public Lands, Connecticut River Conservancy, and Watersheds United of Vermont.
- Investing in a clean environment and ecological health of our land is investing in Vermont's economic recovery from the economic harm from the COVID-19 response. The work of the Vermont Agency of Natural Resources (ANR) is an essential part of this revitalization. Vermont has an opportunity invest clean air, clean water, and sustainable development a means of protecting our economy and quality of life.
- Audubon Vermont supports ANR's budget because the agency plays a direct role in promoting economic development.
 - ANR administers educational, regulatory, land management, and grant programs that are central to the work of Vermont's business, academic, and non-profit communities.
 - Outdoor recreation, including hiking, boating, skiing, camping bird and wildlife viewing and many other activities, depends upon ANR's state parks and forests, dam and reservoir management and safety, water access areas, hunter and angler education, licensing, and state land leasing programs
 - ANR's programs ensure that Vermonters do not become sick from polluted water, air or soil, so that Vermonters can fully participate in the state's economy and so people attracted to our quality of life will bring their businesses here
 - ANR's land management programs support landowners so they can manage their lands in economically and ecologically beneficial and sustainable ways.

- Towns and cities rely on ANR's grant programs to invest in water infrastructure, natural solutions to extreme weather events, and open spaces to improve the well-being of their communities.
- Non-profit and academic organizations also benefit from the grant programs to undertake projects that engage volunteers and contractors to do work that enhances the quality of life in Vermont.
- Ensuring quality permit decisions and grants are issued in a timely and transparent manner provides certainty and predictable outcomes for Vermont's businesses and communities.
- Following the Great Depression and in the midst of the Dust Bowl era, Vermont used federal funds to promote conservation projects that had both immediate and long-term economic benefits. At the national level, enduring programs, such as the Pittman-Roberts Act that funds fish and wildlife protection and management, and the precursor to the modern Natural Resources Conservation Service within the US Department of Agriculture, have created a long-term legacy of important conservation efforts. At the state level, Vermont's State Forester Perry Merrill led the implementation of the Civilian Conservation Corps under which the state invested significant resources in the development of a system of public lands that continues to provide economic benefits today. Vermont has a similar opportunity to invest in both the immediate economic recovery, and a long-term vision for Vermont that ensures both economic and ecological well-being.
- Looking to the ANR FY21 budget, Audubon Vermont appreciates the difficult and hard work done by the ANR leadership to develop the proposal before you today. We are pleased that the agency has been able to protect its core programs through careful management and has even found ways to invest in improving some of its operational systems, which appear targeted towards increasing efficiency without sacrificing environmental protections.
- Looking longer-term, however, this budget carries several challenges that will need to be addressed in order to avoid catastrophic impacts on its ability to implement the programs above, or to realize the potential for investing in Vermont's environment as a means of investing in revitalizing our economy.
 - ANR has, for many years, not had a budget capable of keeping up with even basic inflation, much less the growth in the responsibilities placed upon the agency.
 - Further, the current budget challenges facing the agency are in part a self-inflicted wound, resulting from the Administration's failure to request any fee increases for several biennia.



- The vacancy savings being realized by the agency now are resulting in many key positions remaining unfilled, even after the retirement or departure of highly qualified staff who are leaving significant voids in the agency's capacity to fulfill its obligations.
- As we look forward to FY22, we ask that the Vermont General Assembly not just approve ANR's budget but to also challenge the Administration to look for ways that increase our state's investment in ANR and in the environment as a means of catalyzing a recovery of Vermont's economy.