

## Testimony to the Senate Economic Development, Housing, and General Affairs Committee Joe Short, Northern Forest Center

I'm Joe Short, Vice President for the Northern Forest Center. We're a regional innovation and investment partner creating rural vibrancy by connecting people, the economy, and the forested landscape across Vermont, NH, NY and ME.

Over 20+ years of work in VT has long been focused in the NEK; thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today about how the state can address persistent challenges and support a vibrant future for this special part of the state.

As Vermont has recognized, attracting new residents is essential for economic development. I'd like to share a few examples of how in the Northeast Kingdom we are working to put pieces in place to make the Kingdom an attractive destination for new visitors, businesses, and residents.

First is branding and marketing the region through experience. Increasingly, amenity-rich regions like the Kingdom are ones that people seek for both recreation and as permanent homes. We are facilitating two initiatives to harness digital marketing and social media to tell the story of the Kingdom and introduce both locals and visitors to what it has to offer.

- getNEKedVT (<https://getnekedvt.com/>) highlights attractions, activities and events that make the NEK unique and gives people ways to actively engage in those pursuits through curated adventures and contests.
  - Since the campaign's launch last summer we have had 9000 unique visitors to the campaign website, with MA, NH NY and CT topping the list of where those people are. Organic reach of our social posts is 2400 people per day.
  - Campaign content is developed in partnership with the regions Chambers of Commerce, businesses, and anchor institutions like Catamount Arts.
- Bike the Borderlands (<https://www.bikeborderlands.com/>) is a similar effort focused on leveraging mountain biking for community economic development objectives. It's a collaboration between 8 trail networks across 3 states and Quebec, including Kingdom Trails and Craftsbury Outdoor Center. The group is working together connect riders to new riding experiences and to the local businesses in the places they visit. Over 100 people completed the inaugural Tour de Borderlands last summer, with each one of those representing as much as \$1000 spent in local communities.

Both of these initiatives have made their content and messaging available to enhance the ThinkVT and Stay to Stay programs in the Kingdom.

A second set of initiatives focuses on deepening economic development opportunities and employment tied to the working landscape that underpins the Vermont brand. Together, the Northern Forest Center and Northeast Kingdom Collaborative have secured almost \$400,000 from the Northern Border Regional Commission to invest in outdoor recreation infrastructure and supporting amenities in the Kingdom.

In partnership with the Vermont Wood Works Council, we have paired money from the Working Lands Enterprise Initiative with federal and philanthropic funds to strengthen over 20 Vermont wood products businesses, including three significant manufacturers in the Northeast Kingdom. Companies like Lyndon Furniture and Built by Newport provide good jobs and markets for Vermont wood. This economy based on sound forest stewardship keeps Vermont's forests as forests, sustaining them for forest products as well as for the recreation and aesthetic enjoyment that draws people.

State support can make each of these initiatives more effective in several ways.

1. First is to invest more in community efforts to market Vermont. Marketing work like what I have described to you was at one point financially supported by the state, but that was decades ago. Now it is bootstrapped and finding success, but not at the level needed for Vermont to compete.
2. Second is to continue support for the Working lands Enterprise Initiative. Vermont's direct investment in its working lands economy is unique and one that we share frequently with other states.
3. Third, Vermont and your Agency of Commerce and Community development have played a strong leadership role in the growth and increased impact of the Northern Border Regional Commission, and I urge this to continue. Just as small communities in the Northeast Kingdom are working together for regional benefit, so too must Vermont think and act regionally. Northern New England's challenges and opportunities are shared ones, often best addressed together.

Thank you for your interest in the Northeast Kingdom and I am happy to take any questions.