

VERMONT HOUSING & CONSERVATION BOARD
Legislative Testimony – Crown Farm Retirement Project
House General, February 19, 2019
Jane Lazorchak, Vermont Fish and Wildlife Department



Figure 1. Looking east down the Clyde River from Route. 105 in Charleston towards Island Pond

In 1911, the Vermont Fish and Wildlife Department (VFWD) began what has become a long, rich history of land acquisition when it acquired what is now known as Sandbar Wildlife Management Area. Today, VFWD owns over 140,000 acres of land consisting of 98 WMAs, 5 fish culture facilities, 2 flag-ship conservation camps, 120 access areas, and hundreds of riparian properties throughout Vermont. In addition, VFWD 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.

The mission of the VFWD is the conservation of fish, wildlife, plants and their habitats for the people of Vermont. Land conservation and management is an essential part of VFWD's ability to achieve its mission and fully represent the public's interests in fish and wildlife conservation. Lands owned and managed by VFWD 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 highlight the importance of public land, and land specifically owned by the VFWD to their outdoor recreation interests. While the land conserved by VFWD 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.

To focus our land acquisition work, the VFWD established 12 focus areas for land acquisition work statewide in 2017. By establishing focus areas, the VFWD has targeted our spending and staff time for the next ten years.

VFWD considered the following factors to establish these areas:

1. Existing partner conservation efforts (i.e., don't focus resources where other organizations are 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, or public access in areas where such access is limited);
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.

VFWD is the largest wetland owner in the state and many of our marque Wildlife Management Areas are associated with Vermont's most iconic wetlands such as Dead Creek and Otter Creek Swamps. These areas provide a myriad of public benefits from flood storage to wildlife-based recreation opportunities to conservation of significant and sensitive natural communities. The 12 focus areas build on our investments in these regions and identify new ones to focus on. The most notable focus area centered around wetlands is along the Clyde River from Pensioner Pond in Charleston to Island Pond in Brighton.

At the local level, the Town Plan for Charleston highlights the area's natural resources as the key element for attracting business and maintaining quality of life in the town. It identifies the Clyde River Wetlands as one of two primary natural resource assets in the town, highlighting the ecological, aesthetic, and recreational values of the Clyde River wetlands in detail. At the state level, the Vermont Department of Environmental Conservation has noted the outstanding values of the area and the 4.4-mile long "Buck Flats" section (from 5-Mile Square Road bridge to 10-Mile Square Road bridge) is currently under consideration for designation as a Class One wetland. The significance of the Clyde River stems from the wetlands associated with it which contain exceptional ecological values; particularly in terms of the overall extent, natural community and species diversity, and the prevalence of rare species and community types. The corridor includes hardwood and conifer forested swamps, shrub swamps, sedge covered fens, sedge meadows, deep broadleaf marshes, and emergent marshes. Beaver, muskrat, mink, river otter, raccoon, and several species of snakes, turtles, and amphibians may be found here, as well as numerous invertebrate species.

In addition to the natural resource values of the area, the Clyde River is beloved for recreation and is a main driver for rural economic development in the area, bringing thousands of tourists to the area every year for fishing, kayaking and camping. Conservation along the Clyde River is not only an investment in the natural resources but a direct investment in the region's economy. Clyde River Outfitters on route 105 is a testament to the recreation pressures in the region.

Due to the reasons highlighted above and the relatively little public conserved land in the area, the VFWD has begun to engage in land conservation projects in the area in hopes of starting a Wildlife Management Area over time along the river. In 2017, the VFWD closed on our first acquisition along the Clyde River, in addition to the two Access Areas we already own. This small but very strategic acquisition of 11.7 acres from the Northwoods Stewardship Center got us a foothold in an area. At the same time, we began to engage with numerous other

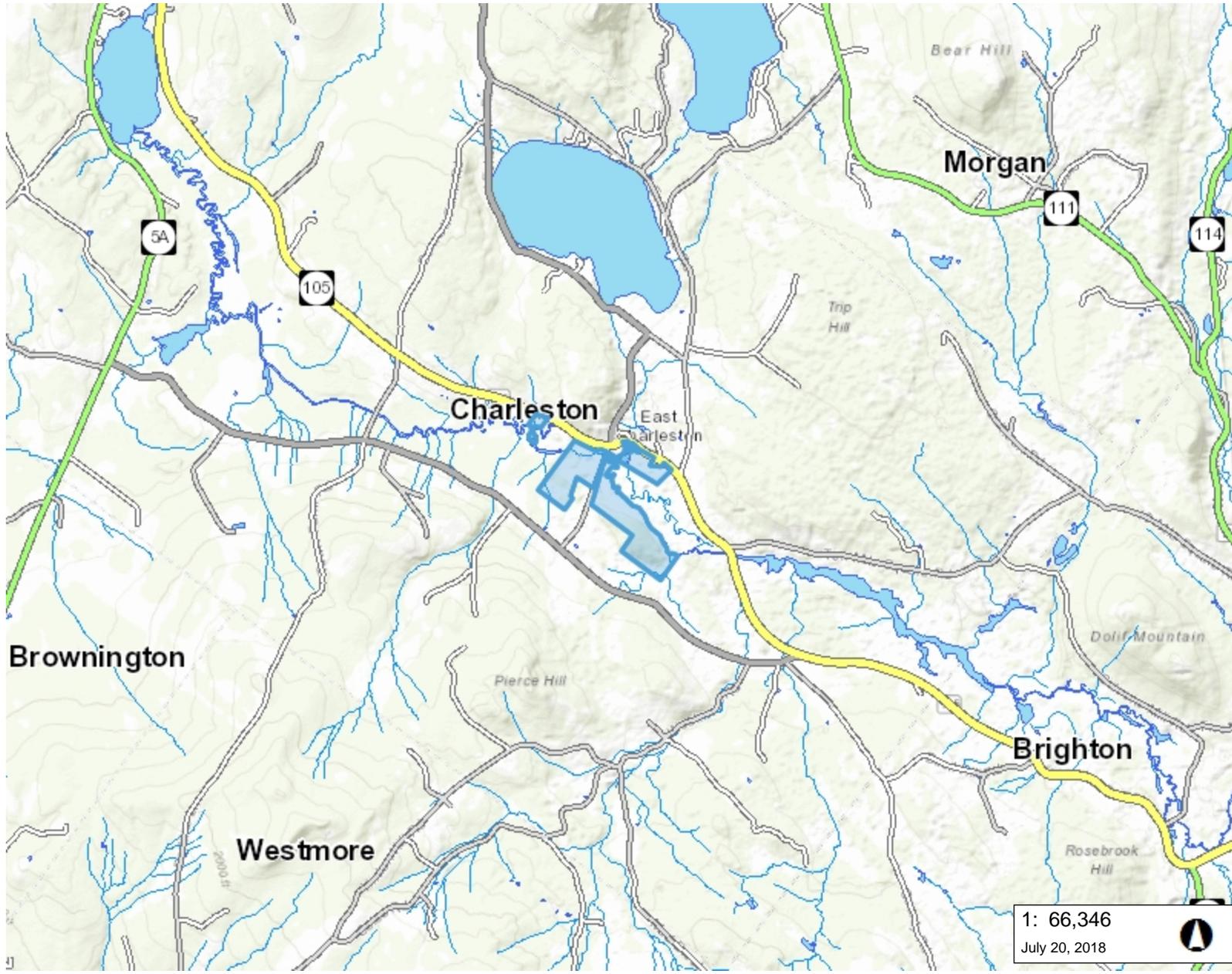
landowners around conservation. One of these projects was the conservation and restoration of Lynwood Crown's farm on Twin Bridges Road.

The VFWD planned to work with Ducks Unlimited (DU) to conserve the Crown Farm. The road that bisects this farm floods every year and the farm is clearly located in a floodplain and on converted associated wetlands. DU, who manages the wetland in-lieu program for the state of Vermont, landed on this property to conserve and restore the wetlands to generate credits for the wetland in-lieu program. Because this parcel is within the region of interest for ownership, we agreed to assume ownership of the site once restored. Unfortunately, due to challenges with the site which we will describe in greater detail below, DU pulled out of the project and the VFWD was left to determine if we still wanted to move forward on our own.

The reincarnation of this project is now an even more exciting partnership between the VFWD, The Nature Conservancy (TNC), the Department of Agriculture and Farm Markets (AAFM) and the Vermont Housing and Conservation Board (VHCB) to realize a farm retirement and the ultimate restoration of a site which sits within a regionally important wetland system. This is the first approved project by VHCB with new funding specifically for farm buyouts. VHCB has committed \$240,000 towards the acquisition and stewardship of this project. This is a great opportunity for both the state to enhance water quality and the ecological integrity of the Clyde River while also giving the farmer the best deal possible to walk away from a farm that has likely always struggled to be profitable and come into compliance. Once the site is acquired, the VFWD will partner with the Department of Environmental Conservation to fully restore the wetlands on the site.

Due to the financial struggles on the farm, the farmer has compromised the site with significant dumping across the farm, with the most significant dump in the southeast corner of the property. As part of this project, the Department will partner with the state Brownfields Program for all the environmental assessment work and anticipates trying to secure grant funding to assist with the clean-up of the dumpsite. If needed, the remaining costs of cleaning up the site will be split between the landowner and the VFWD. Additionally, the AAFM, which has been regulating the farm for groundwater contamination, wants the barns to be included in the project and will fund their decommissioning. Lastly, TNC has agreed to co-hold the conservation easement required by the VHCB grant bringing in additional resources towards the long-term stewardship of this property.

VHCB funding is critical to realize the conservation and restoration of this property. In addition to the funding for the acquisition of the farm, VHCB staff have provided key leadership to support the VFWD in determining who the right partners are to have around the table for this project which is the first of its kind in the state. In a changing agricultural landscape, strategic farm retirements will be key to the success of meeting our water quality goals but should be considered as a last resort when all other options to support the farmer have been exhausted. In the end, the Crown Farm retirement will provide insights into how to successfully navigate these projects to have the best outcome for the environment and the farmer.



LEGEND

Roads

- Interstate
- Principal Arterial
- Minor Arterial
- Major Collector
- Minor Collector
- Local
- Not part of function Classification S

Waterbody

Stream

Town Boundary

1: 66,346
July 20, 2018

NOTES

Map created using ANR's Natural Resources Atlas

3,370.0 0 1,685.00 3,370.0 Meters

WGS_1984_Web_Mercator_Auxiliary_Sphere 1" = 5529 Ft. 1cm = 663 Meters

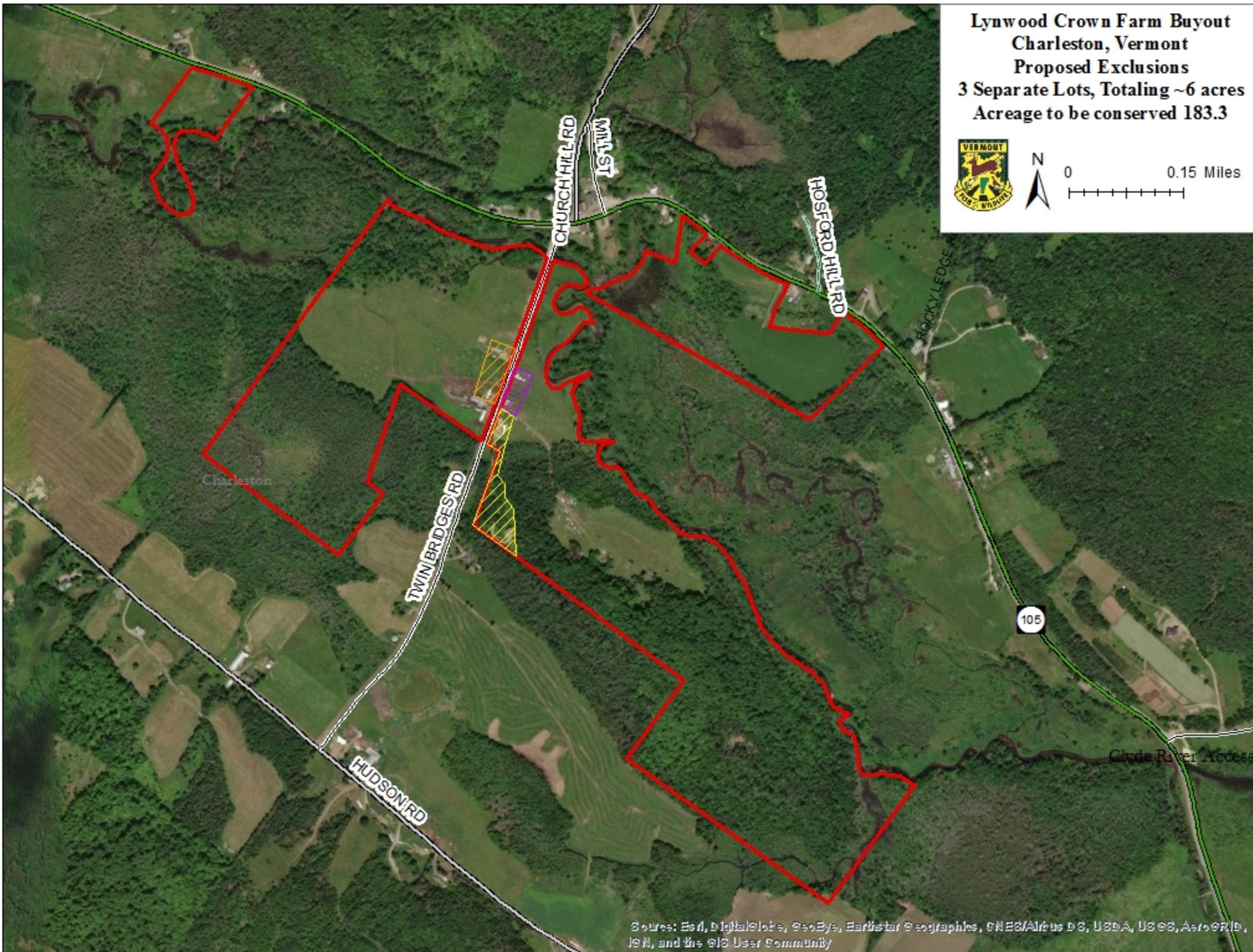
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DISCLAIMER: This map is for general reference only. Data layers that appear on this map may or may not be accurate, current, or otherwise reliable. ANR and the State of Vermont make no representations of any kind, including but not limited to, the warranties of merchantability, or fitness for a particular use, nor are any such warranties to be implied with respect to the data on this map.

Lynwood Crown Farm Buyout
Charleston, Vermont
Proposed Exclusions
3 Separate Lots, Totaling ~6 acres
Acreage to be conserved 183.3



0 0.15 Miles

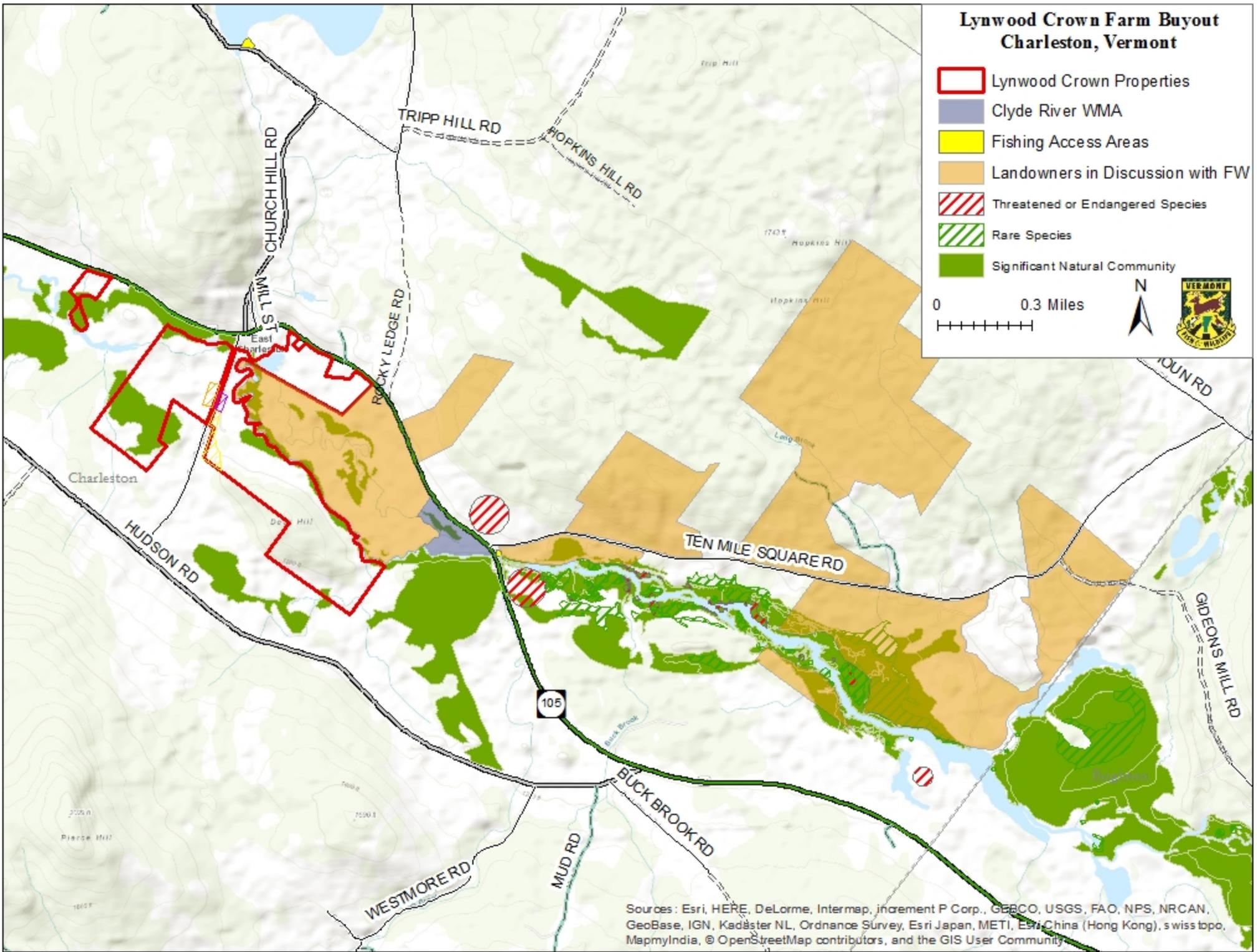
A horizontal scale bar with vertical tick marks, representing a distance of 0.15 miles.

Source: Esri, DigitalGlobe, GeoEye, Earthstar Geographics, CNES/Airbus DS, USDA, USGS, AeroGRID, IGN, and the GIS User Community

Lynwood Crown Farm Buyout Charleston, Vermont

-  Lynwood Crown Properties
-  Clyde River WMA
-  Fishing Access Areas
-  Landowners in Discussion with FW
-  Threatened or Endangered Species
-  Rare Species
-  Significant Natural Community

0 0.3 Miles

Sources: Esri, HERE, DeLorme, Intermap, increment P Corp., GEBCO, USGS, FAO, NPS, NRCAN, GeoBase, IGN, Kadaster NL, Ordnance Survey, Esri Japan, METI, Esri China (Hong Kong), swiss topo, MapmyIndia, © OpenStreetMap contributors, and the GIS User Community