

- NRCS is a federal agency housed within the USDA
- Our non-regulatory agency provides free technical and financial assistance to private landowners to help them achieve their natural resource conservation objectives.
- We employ a variety of technical specialists to help landowners plan and implement conservation practices. Our staff includes soil scientists and conservationists, engineers, agronomists, foresters, wetland specialists, etc.
- Here in VT, we currently have 60 employees on board, scattered across 10 field offices and our state office in Colchester.
- We administer a variety of conservation programs that are authorized every 5 years (or thereabouts) by the federal Farm Bill.
- Our annual budget averages between \$25 to 28 million per year, with the vast majority of that going directly to farm and forest landowners who install conservation practices and/or establish a conservation easement on their land.
- I was asked to speak today about our State Technical Committee and our priority setting process.
- The Farm Bill provides great flexibility to the agency in how conservation program dollars are prioritized to achieve the most important conservation objectives.
- That flexibility is also provided to State Conservationists; however, the Farm Bill does require that State Conservationists use an advisory committee process to identify high priority resource concerns, identify conservation practices to address those resource concerns, and identify priority areas where those practices are needed.
- In Vermont, I work closely with our partners who are members of and actively participate in our State Technical Committee. We meet 4-5 times per year. Meetings are open to the public and are publicly “noticed” to ensure full transparency in the process. All meeting minutes and handouts are also posted on our web site.
- Members include representatives from VT DEC, Fish and Wildlife, Forestry, and Agriculture; VACD, VHCB, VLT, US F&WS, EPA, FSA, Audubon, TNC, NOFA, and a variety of other organizations.
- We also employ 3-4 subcommittees per year to delve into the details of this priority setting process.
- We have numerous conservation programs available to us via the Farm Bill, but the four primary programs we use in Vermont include:
 - EQIP – Annual Funding = \$10 to \$13 million
 - ACEP ALE – Annual Funding = \$3 to \$4.5 million
 - ACEP WRE – Annual Funding = \$700,000 - \$800,000
 - RCPP – Total Value (NRCS share only) of Active Projects (not annual) underway in Vermont = approximately \$21,000,000
- Nationally, NRCS uses a standardized ranking process to evaluate applications for most of its programs. However, each state has flexibility to adapt the ranking process to fit their needs.
- For example, in Vermont, for our EQIP program, we use a 4 part process to prioritize each application for funding – national questions, state questions (developed by program subcommittees of the State Technical Committee, local questions (led by local Conservation Districts), and a Cost/Benefit calculator.
- We can further prioritize funding by identifying what resource concerns we are most interested in addressing – water quality, wildlife and forestry, specialty crops, etc. We do this by setting up specific funding pools for each resource concern, with an associated budget. In Vermont, we direct approximately 80% of our total funding in EQIP to address water quality concerns.
- We can also decide which conservation practices we wish to offer to landowners to address that resource concern.

- For example, we have dramatically increased the amount of funding available for cover crops and other agronomic practices over the last 7 years, resulting in less money available for large infrastructure improvements in barnyards.
- Approximately 10% of our overall EQIP funding each year is targeted to improve forest health and wildlife habitat.
- All of these decisions are made in consultation with the State Tech Committee. The subcommittees generally focus on the ranking questions, while the Committee itself focuses on which funding pools to offer, and what % of our annual allocation to dedicate to each.
- In addition to EQIP, our ACEP ALE program is hugely successful in Vermont, primarily due to our partnership with VHCB, and the Vermont and Upper Valley Land Trusts.
- We provide up to 50% match for the acquisition for all conservation easements acquired on farms, working in partnership with VHCB and the two land trusts. This year alone, we will partner with VHCB to leverage \$4.7 million in federal funds alone on agricultural conservation easements., which will likely fund 25-35 individual projects. During these tough economic times, these funds are often what allows a farm to continue its operations. We treasure this partnership, and look forward to working with VHCB to protect thousands more acres over the coming years, and continue the tradition of Vermont serving as a national model for land conservation.
- Along with VHCB, there are many other key partners that help us get our work done. The Vermont Association of Conservation Districts, and local Conservation Districts, provide substantial support to our agency to help achieve our goals.
- For example, we provide VACD funds to support technical specialists who sit side by side with our staff to provide assistance to farmers in the steps they need to develop and implement Nutrient Management plans. VACD receives a match from the VT Agency of Agriculture to support this work. This match allows NRCS to partner directly with VACD to provide this assistance. Without the match, NRCS would have to use a competitive process to acquire these services, which often results in higher costs and delays to NRCS achieving its mission.
- In addition to VHCB and VACD, we work very closely with other partners that are also part of the VT AG Water Quality Partnership – DEC, VAAFM, UVM Extension, UAF&WA, LCBP, and USDA FSA. These are key partners that either fund or otherwise provide technical assistance directly to the agricultural community to address water quality issues. Throughout this partnership, we cross train our staff, leverage the federal NRCS and FSA funds with state (DEC, VAAFM, and VHCB) and other funds (LCBP), and coordinate and collaborate on key policy decisions (within our control). Our strong and nationally unique partnership has been in place since January 2012, and is key to the success of our mutual long term work on water quality.
- With this, I will conclude by stating that I feel privileged to spend this leg of my career in Vermont, and both the partnerships that are in place and many of the outstanding conservation farmers in Vermont are what makes our work so rewarding.
- I have provided a number of handouts to support my testimony –
 - Provide a list of handouts