



State Natural Resources Conservation Council (NRCC)

An Agency of State Government, Serving Vermont's 14 Conservation Districts

Vermont Association of Conservation Districts (VACD)

Our Land. Our Water. Our Future.

FY18 Highlights and Summary of Legislative Objectives – January 2019

- **The Vermont Clean Water Fund has enabled Conservation Districts to expand their water quality programs at the local level**, working with private landowners, communities and partners in the fields of agriculture, natural resources conservation and restoration, stormwater remediation and more. Districts have been able to increase staffing levels and leverage Federal funding to complement State of Vermont initiatives. Please refer to our Annual Report for highlights of Conservation District accomplishments in FY 2018.
- NRCC and VACD are managing a number of statewide, multi-year Block Grants through agreements with the VT Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC), the Vermont Agency of Agriculture Food and Markets (VAAF), the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) and others. Centrally coordinated agreements for the Conservation Districts through NRCC and VACD have reduced administrative expense, improved tracking and accountability, supported professional development, and enabled the delivery of a consistent set of services through a single agreement. Please refer to the list of major NRCC and VACD Block Grants. **NRCC and VACD support the continuation of centrally-managed Block Grant agreements.**
- Conservation Districts have participated in Vermont's basin planning efforts for many years; the Clean Water Act enabled them to receive targeted funding for this purpose. NRCC is in its second year of managing a Tactical Basin Planning Block Grant through which Conservation Districts provide specific services to VT DEC in support the development and execution of Tactical Basin Plans. This funding has increased the engagement of landowners and communities in local water quality efforts that identify, target, develop and implement water quality projects in support of the Basin Plans. This funding also facilitates greater regional coordination among the Conservation Districts, Regional Planning Commissions, local watershed groups and municipalities. NRCC and VACD consider basin planning to be the foundation of our work and strive to bring basin planning to the local level to enhance public understanding and increase project implementation. **Basin Planning work is critical but underfunded at \$80,000 through NRCC, only ~\$5,000 per Conservation District.**
- NRCC manages a statewide Block Grant from DEC for water quality project final design and implementation. Conservation Districts may apply for capital projects through this funding source and the project can be approved and an agreement developed within a week. **NRCC strongly supports continuing Block Grant agreements between VT DEC and NRCC for water quality project implementation and can provide increased support in the administration and oversight of this program.** VT DEC also awarded Project Development funding to NRCC this year, which will be a critical supplemental source of funding to ensure prioritized water quality project implementation.
- **NRCC and VACD strongly support additional staffing at VT DEC.** Adequate staffing will ensure adequate technical guidance and oversight and increased partner support, help address administrative bottlenecks, and successfully accelerate a well-coordinated and equitable distribution of Clean Water funding to partners.

- **Conservation Districts need long-term funding, and an adequate balance of non-capital funds to support getting capital funding on the ground.** Non-capital operational funds support project development, including conducting needs assessments, developing preliminary designs, and garnering public support for and participation in projects. Non-capital funds also enhance District capacity in the areas of education and outreach, monitoring and evaluation, and management systems to increase operational efficiency.
- **NRCC manages a statewide Agricultural Block Grant from VAAF, and VACD manages several statewide grants from USDA NRCS** to support outreach, education and technical assistance to Vermont's farmers to help them enhance soil quality and improve their bottom line while complying with Vermont's Required Agricultural Practices. This technical assistance enables farmers to access State and Federal funds to support Best Management Practice implementation. Conservation Districts help agricultural producers, especially small farm operators, understand the plethora of programs available to them. VACD and NRCC have played a leadership role in the Vermont Agricultural Water Quality Partnership, facilitating regional and statewide inter-agency meetings aimed at ensuring coordinated, efficient, cost-effective and high quality program delivery to the agricultural community.
- There are many critical and high priority water quality project opportunities with private landowners that face a Clean Water funding gap as compared to public projects. With the exception of agricultural programs, Conservation Districts have noted inequity in providing technical assistance and implementing projects with private landowners through Clean Water funding. **NRCC and VACD strongly support equitable funding for appropriate, high priority projects on private lands.**
- NRCC increased its leadership infrastructure by strengthening its strategic partnership with VACD to provide a more robust management and accountability structure for the Conservation Districts. NRCC has an Agricultural Programs Manager, Water Quality Programs Manager, Administrator and Business Manager to support the coordination and oversight of multiple program agreements. These positions and the overall work of the NRCC is to assist our State and Federal partners in implementation of sound, effective and practical water quality improvements. **NRCC institutional leadership requires an increase in operational funding support of \$68,700, as requested through VAAF, to better support our statewide programs and increase in services in order to meet our shared water quality goals.**

State Natural Resources Conservation Council

An Agency of State Government, Serving Vermont's 14 Conservation Districts

Major Block Grants for Conservation Districts through NRCC and VACD - FY 2018-2019

Agreement	Grantor/Funder	Purpose
NRCC Tactical Basin Planning	Legislature-VT DEC	Funding for Conservation Districts to support the development and execution of Tactical Basin Plans, provide targeted outreach and technical assistance, and develop projects identified in the plans.
NRCC-DEC Block Grant	VT DEC	Capital funding for Conservation Districts to implement non-agricultural water quality projects that have been identified through the Tactical Basin Planning Process.
NRCC Trees for Streams	LCBP, VT DEC	Funding for Conservation Districts to implement stream and shoreland buffer projects.
NRCC Ag-CWIP	VAAFAM	Funding to Conservation Districts to provide outreach, technical assistance and to develop conservation practices on small farms. The agreement includes funding for NRCC to manage, track and report this program to VAAFAM.
VACD RCPP	NRCS	Funding for Conservation Districts to assist small farms in developing Nutrient Management Plans through the UVM Extension "Digging In" NMP Course.
NRCC Core Services	Legislature-VAAFAM	Funding for core services of Conservation Districts, creating a contractual connection between the Districts and their State Statute, and for the governance structure of NRCC.
NRCC Capacity Building/ Professional Development	VAAFAM, NRCS, VACD	Funding for Conservation Districts to build capacity through targeted trainings and support; and funding to develop the capacity of NRCC to provide improved services to Conservation Districts and partners.

<i>Ag-CWIP</i>	<i>Agriculture Clean Water Initiative Program</i>
<i>LCBP</i>	<i>Lake Champlain Basin Program</i>
<i>NRCC</i>	<i>Natural Resources Conservation Council</i>
<i>NRCD</i>	<i>Natural Resources Conservation District</i>
<i>NRCS</i>	<i>USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service</i>
<i>RCPP</i>	<i>Regional Conservation Partnership Program</i>
<i>VAAFAM</i>	<i>Vermont Agency of Agricultural Food and Markets</i>
<i>VACD</i>	<i>Vermont Association of Conservation Districts</i>
<i>VT DEC</i>	<i>VT Department of Environmental Conservation</i>



State Natural Resources Conservation Council (NRCC)

An Agency of State Government, Serving Vermont's 14 Conservation Districts

Vermont Association of Conservation Districts (VACD)

Our Land. Our Water. Our Future.

Preliminary Comments/Questions on Proposed Clean Water Reorganization Legislation – January 2019

- VT DEC's Tactical Basin Planning process is a key and critical organizing structure for regional water quality project identification, prioritization, and implementation, and helps provide a system to coordinate activities among partners and execute clean water projects on the ground. NRCC and VACD strongly encourage any Clean Water funding reorganization to utilize this existing and robust structure and empower and more fully support VT DEC Basin Planning.
- Further clarity is needed on how a regional funding structure through Clean Water Utilities would impact the leadership of the State NRCC that currently provides central funding, oversight, accountability, and professional development to the Conservation Districts as mandated by state law. Vermont is a small state, and NRCC's strategic restructuring has offered VT DEC and VAAFM statewide program delivery, through single block grant agreements distributed among Conservation Districts, that ensures improved oversight, accountability, training and consistency of services. This structure has significant potential for expansion and improvement and could offer solutions that could preclude the need for regionalization through utilities.
- It appears that the primary organizing principle of utilities would be to fund projects that reduce phosphorus. There are multiple factors in addition to the level of phosphorus reduction that determine the priority and feasibility of a project, including co-benefits, timing, landowner logistics, visibility, constructability, ease of access, etc. It is unclear how a primary and single focus on phosphorus reduction will best accelerate projects.
- How will the equity of Clean Water funding throughout Vermont as highlighted in the "All In" approach of the Clean Water Act be preserved? NRCC and VACD believe water quality efforts should be proactive in protection of our natural resources as well as responsive to water quality concerns. Proactive activities are far more cost effective than reactive mitigation. NRCC and VACD do not support a premise that we must focus all efforts in Lake Champlain and Lake Memphremagog Basins to the exclusion of the Connecticut and Hudson River Basins, nor do we believe that statewide investments will prevent our ability to meet phosphorus reduction goals.
- Will the agricultural sector will be included in the proposed regional funding structure? How will utilities be equipped to manage projects with agricultural producers and discern between regulatory and non-regulatory projects under the Required Agricultural Practices?
- How will regionalization and multiplying funding structures address the existing and documented problem that there are already too many small grant agreements requiring excessive administration? This important issue may not be addressed through regionalization.
- Further clarity is needed on the process of how utilities would be formed, and assurances that this process will be fair and transparent, limit conflicts of interest, provide equitable support to various water quality organizations and partners, and be appropriate for distinct water quality sectors.