



Testimony of Lynn Bondurant
to the Senate Institutions Committee

January 30, 2020

Good afternoon, Chair Benning and members of the Committee. Thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today. My name is Lynn Bondurant. I am a resident of the town of Danby, Vermont, and I am volunteer chair of the Vermont Chapter of The Nature Conservancy's Board of Trustees.

I give my time and efforts to The Nature Conservancy because I believe deeply in its mission: to protect the lands and water on which all life depends – including people as well as the countless species of plants, animals, and other living beings with which we share our one planet.

TNC was founded in 1951, and now works in all fifty states and 79 countries around the world. Here in Vermont, our chapter is celebrating its 60th anniversary this year. Over that span, we have helped conserve over 300,000 acres of some of our most biologically rich landscapes, much of that now held by public agencies; we've protected more than 1,200 miles of shoreline; and we manage and maintain 56 natural areas that are open to the public for hunting, fishing, hiking, skiing, and other activities.

But what drives us at TNC and what inspires me is our science, and the work that we do to bring that science to on the ground projects, and have that inform our policy work, so that we are able to create a virtuous cycle of doing everything we can to protect our lands and waters, for the benefit of both wildlife and people. We are proud to be bringing this approach in helping tackle pressing challenges facing our great little state like climate change, water quality, flood vulnerability, and the well-being of our rural communities.

I am here today to thank you for your past strong support for the work of the Vermont Housing and Conservation Board and its partners who make projects happen on the ground. And I'm excited to tell you the story of a significant new conservation success that was made possible by VHCB funding – one of the so-called “legacy” forestland projects that the Senate provided an additional \$500,000 to VHCB for in its FY20 funding, and that also was supported with water quality bond funding.

Last year, TNC purchased 3,500 acres of undeveloped forestland at Glebe Mountain in the towns of Windham and Londonderry. This is an area that has been in our sights as a conservation priority for decades, but as is true of many such projects it took a lot of time, patience and perseverance until an opportunity emerged with the landowner to work out a

deal. When that window opened, it was critical that we were able to secure funding from VHCB to help get the project across the finish line.

In the 1990s, TNC science identified Glebe Mountain and the forest around it as one of Vermont's best opportunities to protect a large and intact forest block, and we have remained focused on this goal ever since. Now, new ground-breaking science recently released by TNC shows the Glebe Mountain forest block as a high priority for the whole northeastern U.S. as part of a resilient and connected network of lands that will allow wildlife to move and adapt to our changing climate.

TNC's acquisition of Glebe Mountain safeguards a big, rich area of wildlife habitat. Not only does the site contain one of the most significant beech stands in southern Vermont—a critical source of food for black bears in summer and fall—it also is important for a host of northern New England forest birds, notably Wood Thrush, Ruffed Grouse, Black-throated Blue Warblers and Chestnut-sided Warblers, which are listed as Species of Greatest Conservation Need by the Vermont Fish and Wildlife Department. Our ecological assessment also determined that nearly the entire property – 95% – contains state significant natural communities.

Equally important from our perspective, conservation of Glebe Mountain provides a number of important benefits for people in the communities of Windham and Londonderry and beyond, including:

- water quality protection and enhancement,
- reduced flood vulnerability,
- renewed opportunities for public access and outdoor recreation, and
- helping rein in climate change by absorbing carbon from the air.

Our conservation efforts at Glebe Mountain are helping to protect and improve water quality in two key ways:

- First, the property contains a number of headwater streams, including nearly all of the upper Cobb Brook watershed that flows into Hamilton Falls at Jamaica State Park and the West River. By ensuring that these areas will remain forested, water quality downstream will not be degraded by the effects of development.
- Second, we are undertaking badly needed watershed restoration practices in Cobb Brook to reverse water quality and habitat degradation that has happened from past land use. Specifically, we are removing several undersized culverts that have caused dramatic erosion, sedimentation, and streambed scouring, and we are adding large wood (felled trees) to the waterway to re-establish a healthy stream ecosystem. Brook trout and other native aquatic species on site will benefit from the improved water quality that will result from these actions, as will communities downstream.

Our Glebe Mountain acquisition also will help to reduce the vulnerability of downstream landowners and settlements to flooding. The vast forest lands on the property act like a natural sponge in absorbing rainwater and snowmelt, thereby removing the risk of much higher and

volatile flows that typically occur in developed areas where water is less able to infiltrate the ground. In addition, our restoration efforts in Cobb Brook will help the stream to function more naturally, again helping to reduce high flows downstream. This is a key benefit for the town of Londonderry, which experiences significant, repetitive flooding and is now better protected from exacerbated flooding in the future – when more frequent and intense storm events are more likely as our climate changes.

At a time when more and more land in Vermont is being posted and long-standing public access is being precluded, our acquisition of Glebe Mountain supported by VHCB funding has helped counter the trend. Prior to our purchase, all 3,500 acres of the property had been posted for 20 years by the prior owner for his exclusive use as a private hunting ground. We have now reopened the property to the public in perpetuity for hiking, fishing, snowshoeing, hunting and other activities. This has renewed opportunities for Vermonters and others to get out on the land, be active, and connect with the outdoors, with all the associated benefits for personal enjoyment, health, well-being, families, and communities.

Protecting the big area of forest at Glebe Mountain also is important in helping Vermont buffer the impacts of climate change. In addition to helping wildlife and other native species thrive in a changing climate and reducing the vulnerability of downstream communities to flooding as described earlier, the forests at Glebe Mountain will be an enduring part of a key strategy for slowing climate change – using the natural power of forests to pull carbon out of the air and store it in trees and other plants.

For all of these reasons, the community response to our conservation of Glebe Mountain has been overwhelmingly positive. One Windham County leader described the project as a wildly popular acquisition. He noted that community members in Londonderry and Windham are very excited to have this area protected and to have access to it once again for recreation, after a long period when it was off-limits.

All of these benefits for Vermonters and nature – which will last in perpetuity – were made possible by VHCB funding. We received a \$750,000 grant from VHCB, which was critical in closing the gap for the more than \$4 million total project cost. As is typical for VHCB-funded conservation projects, this translates into each \$1 of state investment through VHCB leveraging more than \$4 from other sources. We think that's a pretty good return on investment.

Opportunities to conserve big forested tracts like Glebe Mountain are rare in Vermont and are usually “now or never” moments. When they arise, it is essential to have a sufficient, reliable source of state funding available to help make them happen. I therefore urge you to support full funding for the Vermont Housing and Conservation Trust in accordance with the long-standing statutory requirement. For FY21, this would be approximately \$22.4 million.

Thank you for your time and consideration of my perspective. I would be happy to answer any questions.