



Vermont Association of Conservation Districts

Our Land. Our Water. Our Future.

Vermont Association of Conservation Districts

Request for state appropriations for Vermont's Natural Resources Conservation Districts

The Vermont State Natural Resources Conservation Council (NRCC) was established in 1939 under Vermont's [Soil Conservation Act](#) "to provide for the conservation, development, and use of the natural resources of this State" in a way that "protects and promotes the health, safety, and general welfare of its people." Vermont's 14 Natural Resources Conservation Districts are governmental subdivisions that were established by landowners through the petitioning process laid out in the Soil Conservation Act, and they operate under the authority of the NRCC to assist in the implementation of conservation practices at the local level. The Vermont Association of Conservation Districts, established in 1980, is the membership association of Vermont's Conservation Districts ([click here](#) for our 2021 Annual Report).

Vermont's Conservation Districts are trusted and effective members of the agricultural and conservation communities. District Managers and staff members maintain a wealth of skills and information necessary to address the unique needs of local land stewards as well as state natural resource concerns. However, unlike Conservation Districts in other states, Vermont Districts do not receive adequate funding through state appropriations, and our ability to fully exercise our potential is limited by a lack of resources. The only consistent funding that Districts receive from the state is an annual grant of \$112,000 in the Agency of Agriculture's budget, which results in less than \$8,000 per District and minimal administrative support for NRCC.

The work that Conservation Districts do in Vermont communities is becoming increasingly important, especially in light of the state's clean water goals and Vermont's Climate Action Plan. In order to do our work effectively, the Vermont Association of Conservation Districts is requesting state funding to meet immediate needs in three different categories for fiscal year 2023:

Natural Resources Conservation District's Funding Requests for FY2023:

- **\$2.1 million in one-time funding for a 3-year Agricultural Resource Specialist Training Program**
- **\$248,000 in one-time funding for immediate equipment and capital improvement needs**
- **\$1.5 million in base funding to support ongoing needs**

\$2.1 million in one-time funding for a 3-year Agricultural Resource Specialist (ARS) Training Program

We are requesting a one-time appropriation of \$2.1 million to be spent over the next three years to develop and implement a state-wide training program for our Agricultural Resources Specialists in order to expand and deepen our support of farmers and forest landowners who want to address a wide range of natural resource concerns. The Agricultural Resource Specialist is an advanced professional service coordinator who provides outreach and education regarding Vermont's Required Agricultural Practices, conducts on-farm resource reviews and needs assessments, carries out planning to help farmers become eligible for various grant programs, makes referrals, coordinates teams of technical service providers assisting the farm, helps farmers complete grant applications for financial assistance, supports the design and implementation of conservation projects, and monitors the results of those projects. The training program will help provide the Agricultural Resource Specialists with the knowledge and skills they need to provide these services in a more coordinated and efficient manner statewide.

\$248,000 in one-time funding for immediate equipment and capital improvement needs

Conservation Districts currently provide a wide range of services to communities and work directly with landowners to implement conservation projects on the ground. However, because District functions are limited to the specifications of the various operational grants we have to piecemeal together, we do not have the flexibility to purchase much needed equipment and software for our programming and projects. We have identified \$248,000 in immediate equipment and capital improvement needs, which includes a District-owned vehicle with a mounted hydraulic soil sampler and associated precision agriculture software to conduct soil sample farm visits in northern Districts; materials for tree planting stewardship in six Districts; computer hardware for a new Bookkeeper position in the Winooski District; and \$100,000 for the Poultney Mettowee District to purchase the small building where they currently rent space to have a permanent office. This building

is for sale, and the Poultney Mettowee District is one of several districts not co-housed with the federal Natural Resources Conservation Service.

\$1,388,000 in base funding to increase VAAFMs NRCC base budget to \$1.5 million to support ongoing operational costs

[10 V.S.A. 31 §706](#) states that NRCC shall allocate funding among the districts “in such amounts as shall be fair, reasonable, and in the public interest” with due consideration given to “the greater relative expense of carrying on operations, the volume of work to be done, and the special importance of instituting conservation operations immediately.” Yet NRCC’s base budget has remained level funded at \$112,000 for the past decade, which is hugely insufficient to cover the scope of work that Conservation Districts do on behalf of the state. We request an additional appropriation of \$1,388,000 to increase NRCC’s base budget to \$1.5 million to support administrative and operational costs of Vermont’s 14 Conservation Districts. This funding will have a double impact, as we currently have operational capacity to leverage state dollars to draw down federal funds. Conservation Districts receive roughly half of our funding from the state and half from federal grants, but we are often limited in our ability to draw down federal funding due to a lack of matching state funds.

Conservation Districts receive funding through a piecemeal approach of utilizing private, state, and federal grants, but do not currently receive adequate state funding dedicated to core organizational and administrative functions. Funding from grants is limited, inconsistent, and does not offer secure finances for long-term planning. As a result, Districts are understaffed, and District Managers’ ability to spend time managing District operations and on-the-ground work is directly restricted by the need to perpetually identify and apply for funding from various sources. District Managers therefore struggle to pursue new programs or improve and expand existing programs.

In addition to providing a wide range of technical and financial services, Vermont’s Conservation Districts represent community members and landowners in advising government agencies in the development of natural resources programs and policies through local Work Groups. State government often asks for local stakeholder input to help inform state policies around conservation and natural resources, and we are often the facilitators of those community-level conversations. Our FY23 funding requests are critical for allowing us to continue the important work that we do in helping to advance state conservation goals.

Categories of Funding and Estimates of Costs:

Staffing (Salary & Benefits)

- \$963,000 for 14 Districts and NRCC

Program Outreach (Materials & Communications Platforms)

- \$70,500 for 12 Districts

Tech/IT Needs (Website maintenance, Software upgrades & Licenses)

- \$32,000 for 12 Districts and the NRCC

Professional Development & Training

- \$24,500 for 11 Districts

Per Diems for Supervisors and Farm Local Work Groups

- \$30,000 for 11 Districts

Legal Support

- \$60,000 for 4 Districts and the NRCC

Purchased Property Services

- \$2,000 for the Grand Isle Conservation District to cover their yearly rent to Lake Champlain Islands Economic Development Corporation (other Purchased Property Services are built into the \$248k one-time request)

Implementation of Local Projects

- \$200,000 for 14 Districts

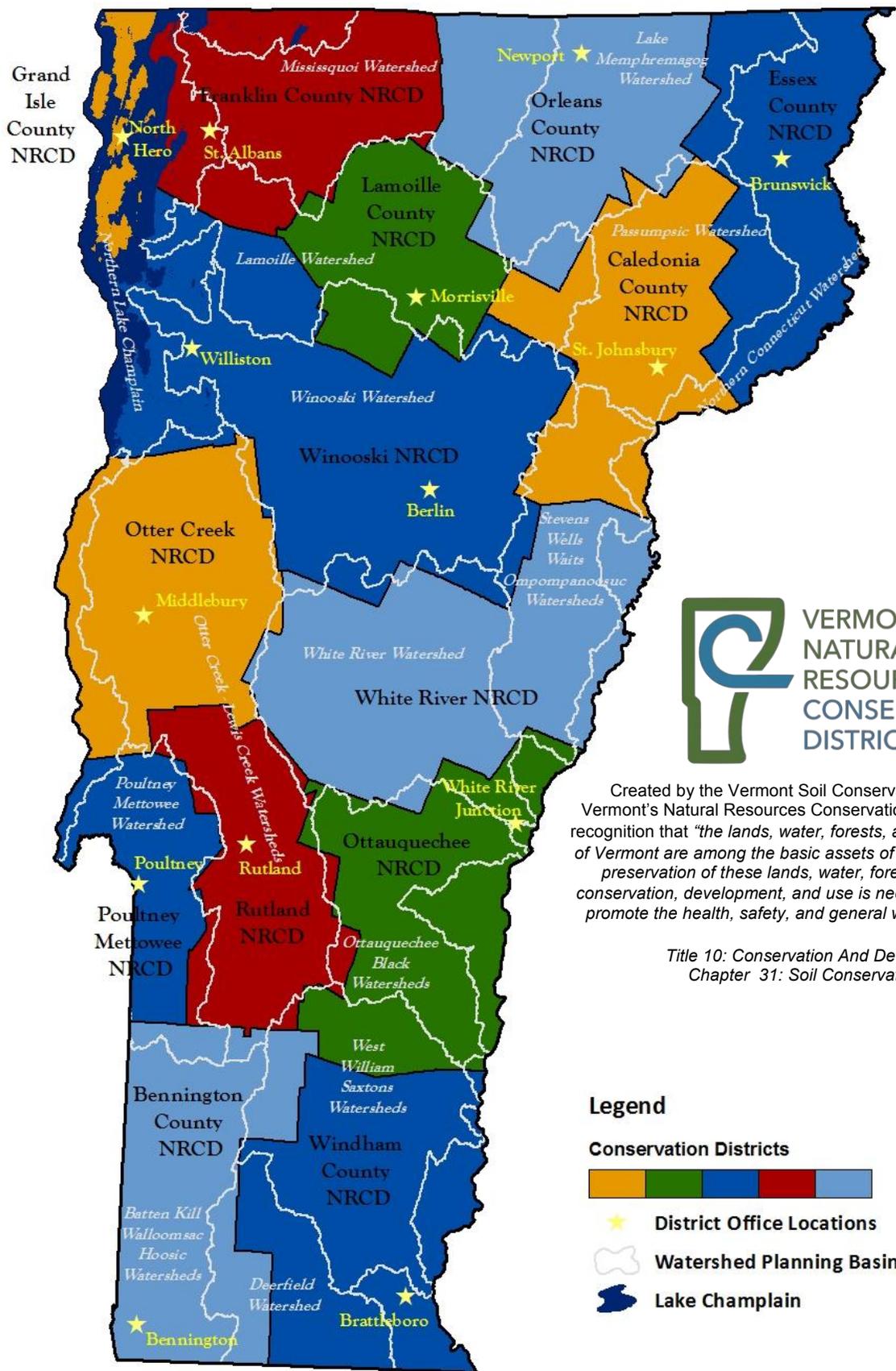
Thank you for your consideration of this request. We are prepared to answer any questions you may have and/or provide additional information about our request.

Signed,



Executive Director, Vermont Association of Conservation Districts

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**VERMONT
NATURAL
RESOURCES
CONSERVATION
DISTRICTS**

Created by the Vermont Soil Conservation Act of 1939, Vermont's Natural Resources Conservation Districts operate in recognition that "the lands, water, forests, and wildlife of the State of Vermont are among the basic assets of the state, and that the preservation of these lands, water, forests, and wildlife by conservation, development, and use is necessary to protect and promote the health, safety, and general welfare of its people."

Title 10: Conservation And Development
Chapter 31: Soil Conservation Act

Legend

Conservation Districts



-  District Office Locations
-  Watershed Planning Basins
-  Lake Champlain



Organization Chart of Vermont Conservation Districts

