



VERMONT FOREST PARTNERSHIP

February 8, 2021

Subject: Support for Governor's FY22 Appropriations Recommendations

Dear Chair Sheldon and Members of House Committee on Natural Resources, Fish & Wildlife:

Vermont forests are fundamental to who we are as a people and as a state and are key for the success and health of our communities. Our decisions about how we protect and manage our forests are deeply tied to the recovery of our state's prosperity while we are in the midst of a pandemic and economic recession. As described in the "Rebuilding a Resilient Vermont" vision statement that Phil Huffman recently shared with you (attached again for reference), our organizations support a future where:

- Strategic investments in technology, career training, job growth and other assistance create a more renewable, sustainable, and energy efficient modern economy for all Vermonters;
- Investing in Vermont's working and natural lands bolsters a critical part of our economy and our landscape; and
- All Vermonters have access to clean and healthy air, water, soil, and outdoor spaces.

We see opportunities to support these goals through supporting the following investments in the Governor's FY22 One-Time General Appropriations recommendations:

Vermont Housing and Conservation Board: We support the Governor's recommendation to allocate \$20,000,000 of one-time funds to the Vermont Housing and Conservation Board (VHCB) and the recommendation of \$10,804,840 to VHCB from the property transfer tax. In addition, we strongly recommend ensuring VHCB retains the discretion on how to allocate its funds between housing and conservation to best meet community needs. The Governor's language binds new one-time dollars to only housing. Given the challenges facing Vermont today, it has never been more imperative to invest fully in VHCB. With its conservation and

housing partners across the state, VHCB provides vital support for and protection of Vermont's working and natural landscape, while growing Vermont's historic downtowns, and supporting our economy and quality of life.

Agency of Natural Resources Staff: We support the Governor's recommendation to authorize the Vermont Department of Fish and Wildlife to bill applicants for staff participation in Act 250 permit application process. We know that all of the Departments within the Agency of Natural Resources are facing significant staff capacity challenges. In order to implement statutes and regulations to protect Vermont's forests and the health of our communities, and to administer programs to support our working lands and outdoor recreation economy, the General Assembly must provide the Agency with the necessary resources and revenue.

Working Lands: We support the recommendation of \$3,500,000 to the Working Lands Enterprise Initiative administered by the Agency of Agriculture Food and Markets and the Working Lands Enterprise Board. These investments will provide necessary support during a period of intense financial and structural challenges to both the farm and forest working lands enterprises, providing employment and opportunities for entrepreneurs. We must provide the resources to help strengthen and grow this sector in order to keep our landscape of working lands, including our forests, healthy.

Outdoor recreation: We support the recommendation of \$5,000,000 for the Vermont Outdoor Recreation Economic Collaborative and \$5,000,000 for recreational infrastructure and access on state lands, and improvements to Vermont's trail network. A vibrant outdoor recreation economy directly supports related businesses and organizations. Investing in outdoor recreation also encourages healthy individuals and communities, enhances the Vermont lifestyle and brand, increases people's connection to nature, and attracts high-quality employers and a sustainable workforce in all economic sectors. If the Legislature decides to support an alternative trail review program outside of Act 250, we recommend allocating a portion of the \$5,000,000 for recreational infrastructure to support staff to oversee the trail review program.

Livable and Prosperous Vermont Cities, Towns and Villages: We support the recommendation of \$5,000,000 for the Department of Housing and Community Development's Better Places program to improve and revitalize public spaces, \$14,000,000 for the Department of Environmental Conservation's brownfield remediation and environmental cleanup program, and \$11,000,000 for the Brownfields Revitalization Fund administered by the Agency of Commerce and Community Development. Investments in making our settled areas more walkable, livable, and thriving also reduces the pressure to develop our open spaces including forests, reducing sprawl and forest fragmentation.

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Vermont's forests are a critical investment in our future, and the investments highlighted above will help protect our forests while also supporting our state's recovery from the COVID-19 crisis. Forests provide valuable forest products and related jobs, and are a key component of

Vermont's outdoor recreation and tourism sector, upon which many of our rural communities depend.

Our state's forests are also a critical natural solution to other pressing problems. Maintaining and growing healthy forests are the single most effective step we can make in pulling carbon out of the air as a way to fight climate change. Investing in Vermont's forests increases the resilience of our communities against the increased frequency and intensity of extreme weather by slowing the release of rainwater and snowmelt, thereby reducing downstream flooding. Protecting our forests also provides critical wildlife habitat, restores our watersheds to health and helps to ensure clean water across the state.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Co-chairs of Vermont Forest Partnership:

David Mears, Audubon Vermont
Phil Huffman, The Nature Conservancy
Shelby Semmes, The Trust for Public Land
Lauren Hierl, Vermont Conservation Voters
Tracy Zschau, Vermont Land Trust
Jamey Fidel, Vermont Natural Resource Council