



**Testimony before the Vermont General Assembly  
House Committee on Natural Resources, Fish and Wildlife**

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Overview:

- Audubon Vermont supports H.606, “An act relating to community resilience and biodiversity protection” and encourages the Committee to further develop the important concepts addressed in the bill
- We support developing clear and understandable goals and an actionable plan for conserving a greater portion of the Vermont landscape in an open state, including both natural and working lands – with a focus on recognizing the important human dimensions of this work, including supporting the people whose livelihoods and communities depend upon working forests and farms, and ensuring that the public, including underserved communities, have access to open spaces and nature
- Bird populations in North America are facing a catastrophic level of decline (nearly 3 billion birds gone since 1970) and have an uncertain future due to climate change and habitat loss (94 species in Vermont highly or moderately vulnerable to extinction as a result of climate change). See [Cornell Lab of Ornithology Report](#), and Audubon’s [Survival By Degrees](#) report.
- We support the use of a range of tools to respond to the need to restore natural and working lands for birds and people including,
  - transparent and inclusive planning process to set targets for conserving a mix of natural and working land categories that balance the interests of private landowners, working lands enterprises, and public values
  - permanent conservation on private land,
  - creation of new or expanded parks, community forests, and wilderness preserves,
  - funding for voluntary ecological restoration projects on private lands,
  - land conservation coordinated with efforts to restore watershed health for Vermont’s major watersheds,
  - projects that increase public access to nature and outdoor recreation, particularly for underserved communities,
  - expanded regulations to protect ecologically sensitive lands, rare and unique ecosystems and critical habitat, and
  - investment in the workforce needed to sustain our landscape of natural and working lands.
- **Applying these tools to support a shared land conservation vision will provide significant benefits for birds, and the places in Vermont that birds and communities need to thrive**

Questions: We do, however, request that the Committee broaden the scope of the work proposed by the bill as illustrated by the questions below

- What counts as “conserved” lands?
  - Does this category of land include only those properties permanently conserved through the purchase of development rights by a land trust, or public ownership?
  - Does the “conserved” land need to be managed to optimize the water quality, biodiversity, and climate change mitigation or adaptation benefits of open land, or is it enough that the land cannot be developed?
  - Does the “conserved” land need to be accessible by the public for outdoor recreation?
- Are we directing resources to the critical infrastructure necessary to maintain or expand our natural and working lands, including the public managers, land trusts, and workforce skilled and experienced in working on the land?
- Should Vermont set targets and measure progress to achieving protections for land categories broader than just permanently conserved lands? For instance,
  - Should we set targets for land enrolled in current use?
  - Do working lands such as farms or managed forests qualify if voluntarily managed to reduce water pollution, improve soil health, increase carbon storage, or create wildlife habitat?
  - For instance, should we include land that is protected from development through long-term agreements, contracts, or leases, such as can occur through programs like NRCS CRP, or USFWS Partners?
  - Similarly, do programs engaging residential landowners to adopt conservation strategies in their backyards count as land conservation?
  - Should we set targets and identify locations for land necessary to ensure that all Vermonters have access to nature?
  - Should we target lands for conservation with benefits that align with watershed protection strategies, and strategies to protect or restore critical wildlife corridors and habitat?
  - Should we include land protected from development by virtue of local, state or federal regulatory laws?
  - **With all of this in mind, and if we include a broader set of land categories, is 30% or even 50% enough to achieve our larger vision and goals?**

Why Consider a Broader Range of Tools Beyond Permanent Conservation:

- Permanent conservation through the purchase of conservation easements to prevent the conversion of natural and working lands to development, or the placement of additional natural or working lands into public ownership, are not the only tools available to the State of Vermont to protect our forests and fields
- There exists a range of intensity of human use for natural and working lands, with each category within that range playing an important ecological and economic role (i.e. consider the range of forest management categories that include old or passively managed forests, forests managed for old growth characteristics, lightly managed forests, and intensively managed forests – each of these forest types provide a range of ecological or climate benefits, and all are vastly more ecologically valuable than developed land)
- A majority of the open land in Vermont that is either currently maintained in a natural or working lands status is privately owned, with the potential to be developed

- Acknowledging and promoting the economic benefits of natural and working lands is necessary to ensure that private landowners have the option and incentive to keep farms as farms, and forests as forests
- Not all permanently conserved lands are managed in a manner that optimizes the ecological benefits of natural and working lands
- Even residential properties have the potential to provide ecological value – there is a risk to focusing on land conservation strategies for land that is someplace else, exacerbating our current disconnection from nature

Equity Concerns:

- Not all Vermonters have the same level of access to open land or nature, and not all Vermonters have historically had the same opportunity to own land, including the original indigenous stewards of this land -- we have an obligation to understand and address these inequities
- A program of public investment that primarily focuses on purchasing development rights runs a real risk of exacerbating existing inequities or missing opportunities to prioritize programs that directly address those inequities
- A program that excludes working lands misses a critical opportunity to engage those Vermonters most tied to and engaged in protecting the ecological health, biodiversity and productivity of our open lands as partners, for example, the farmers, maple syrup producers, loggers, foresters and many businesses and communities that depend upon the prosperity and cultural value generated by their relationship to the land

Funding: Setting goals for land conservation are meaningless without sufficient resources to achieve those goals. Consideration should be given to the following funding needs:

- ANR staffing needs to do the monitoring and analysis necessary to recommend land conservation categories, targets and strategies
- ANR capital costs to sustain and enhance existing publicly owned state lands – sufficient to maintain State Parks and Forests, Wildlife Management Areas, and other state owned or managed lands
- Full funding for Vermont Housing and Conservation Board program, both for land conservation and housing
- Support to non-profit organizations in the form of state matching funds, through programs such as the Clean Water Fund, or newly established climate funds, that will allow Vermont to benefit from the increased federal funds flowing towards land conservation efforts and that require matching funds to qualify
- Support to local governments for the establishment of local parks and community forests
- Expanded opportunities for young people, veterans, and unemployed or underemployed Vermonters to help conserve public lands and waters through programs like the Vermont Youth Conservation Corps and the Serve, Learn and Earn partnership