

Julie Moore, ANR Secretary

January 26, 2022

Remarks to House Natural Resources, Fish & Wildlife Cmte on H.606

FRAMING

- Conservation is a core component of the Agency's work, and we are broadly supportive of the conservation goals of the bill and the importance of a resilient and connected landscape
 - Important to ensure a shared definition conservation
 - In ANR parlance, conservation is wise use; preservation equals (nearly) no use.
 - Preservation is a subset of conservation
 - Agency's land conservation effort importantly includes both
 - Also, Agency uses the word Conservation in referring to the suite of tools and practices that are used to ensure ecological function and all the co-benefits and avoided costs thereof
 - Land acquisition and legal protection are one, a massively important one, but only one tool/practice.
- The Agency plays a lead role in land conservation activities throughout Vermont, owning and stewarding more than 350,000 acres.
- Agency leadership in this space is not limited to state acquisitions and conservation initiatives, but also in identifying and providing funding opportunities, and by informing and guiding other organizations with science and policy regarding outstanding public resource values.
 - There are many public, non-profit, and private organizations that play critically important roles in conserving Vermont's important natural and recreational resources
 - Strong relationships and ongoing collaboration between the Agency and our partners is essential to meeting Vermont's land protection and conservation needs

AREAS THE COULD BENEFIT FROM FURTHER DISCUSSION

- Emphasis on permanent conservation, particularly in the definitions, is a concern
 - The President's 30x30 challenge specifically emphasizes the notion of "conservation" as opposed to the related but different concept of "protection" or "preservation"
 - This recognizes that many uses of our lands and waters, including of working lands, can be consistent with the long-term health and sustainability of natural systems and is consistent with the Agency's definitions I noted above
 - Important role of voluntary stewardship on private lands
 - With approximately 80% of Vermont in private ownership, the thoughtful management and stewardship by landowners is critical to achieving landscape-scale conservation goals.
 - Vermont has a range of conservation programs that support private landowners' thoughtful stewardship of their land that should be considered in developing a conservation vision for the state

- Notably the Vermont Use Value Appraisal Program
- Role of Vermont Conservation Design
 - VCD is advisory as opposed to determinative
 - Provides information about the places that are most ecologically rich, serve as important connections or pinch points for movement across the landscape, or that are most rare or imperiled, but this information alone should not be the sole guide or measure of success for how lands and waters are protected, conserved, or restored.
 - Sets science-based quantitative and distributional goals for maintaining and restoring an ecologically functional landscape
 - Provides a scientific benchmark for long-term conservation success in the state
 - Identifies high-priority features for conservation; it does not identify specific tools or pathways to achieve that conservation. There are many strategies for conserving ecological function.
 - Provides a framework for evaluating ecological value, but not full set of land values
 - In sum, Vermont Conservation Design is a science-based tool designed to inform conservation efforts ranging from land use planning, technical assistance to private landowners, and decisions regarding forest and habitat fragmentation and connectivity in regulatory processes
 - It is not a land-use planning framework
- The Agency buys and owns land for many reasons beyond natural features, including public access, public benefit, public recreation, social well-being and many raw materials, goods and services
 - The Agency considers a full suite of land values deciding how and for what purposes land is to be managed is a consideration that, to a large extent, influences which lands are considered a priority for acquisition.
 - Conservation value of a particular place should not be measured solely in biological terms – should yield meaningful benefits in the lives of all Vermonters, and these benefits should be equitably distributed
 - Should help local communities achieve their own conservation priorities and vision
- What supports are most critical to achieving 30x30 goal? (planning vs. resources)
 - Vermont has a well-established network of conservation organizations, each with their own conservation objectives – important to hear from them
 - Willing landowners also needed
 - Financial considerations
 - Permanent conservation (actual acquisition of conservation land through easement or fee) has a significant price tag and will take many millions of dollars to achieve.
 - Recognition that stewardship (legal monitoring and defense as well as land stewardship) requires both technical and financial resources, and that the costs of owning land do not end, but rather only begin with the actual purchase.
 - Needs to be an intentional component of the work.
 - Encourage you to ask conservation partner orgs about capacity/resources to steward present holdings and meet future needs

SPECIFIC NOTES ON THE DRAFT:

- Page 5, §2803(1): "...a plan to implement Vermont Conservation Design..." suggests a singular solution
- Page 6, §2803(2)(D): "...an actionable conservation plan establishing how the goals will be achieved, using Vermont Conservation Design as a guide..."
 - VCD contains information that should be considered when developing a conservation plan, but it not a plan in and of itself
- Page 6, §2803(3): "The conserved land inventory shall be updated annually to track progress toward meeting the goals of this chapter."
 - This will probably require some legislation requiring the filing of conservation easements with the Agency (or otherwise informed the Agency) when they close of easements so we can track it as the bill requires.
 - Put another way, we are not collecting this information now