

To: House Committee on Natural Resources, Fish and Wildlife  
From: Tracy Zschau, Vice President for Land Protection, Vermont Land Trust  
Date: February 9, 2022  
Re: H606

**For the record:** my name is Tracy Zschau, Vice President for Land Protection at VLT. I've been with VLT since 1997 first developing land conservation projects across the Northeast Kingdom, where I live – and I moved to a statewide leadership position about 7 years ago and now work with the team of staff that develop and steward conservation projects across the State.

**THANK YOU** Chair Sheldon and the rest of the committee for inviting me to testify today – as you continue your work on H606 - An Act relating to community resilience and biodiversity. You asked that VLT speak to our experience in land conservation in Vermont as it relates to 30X30 goals, as expressed in this bill.

First off, I commend you on your work here – it is indeed timely to focus attention on the critical role our landscape plays. Land is central to Vermont's identity, our economic prosperity, the health of our ecosystems, and the wellbeing of our people. Vermont's lands are at the center of our future, and the future of the larger region. For biological diversity, climate change resilience and adaptation, our rural economy and recreation, and our collective and individual health. Focusing attention, resources and strategy in supporting our landscape resilience is critical and I think this bill can set that stage really well in what it tasks the Agency of Natural Resources to do.

**VLT** Since 1977 VLT has been working to protect land from development—particularly working lands, ecologically important areas and community resources. And over the past 45 years we have developed a track record of success in delivering results for Vermont - we have conserved over **2,200 parcels totaling more than 635,000 acres, 11 % of the state.** And today we remain very active in the conservation of our state's most precious resources, including connected forest blocks to boost our resilience to climate change, community lands that bring happiness, health and recreational opportunities and high-quality agricultural land that feeds us.

Of that total, VLT has conserved **approximately 439,000 acres of forestland. This represents 10% of the forestland in the state.** We work to conserve forestland, at both the landscape-scale, using tools like Vermont Conservation Design, to guide our work as well as at the community-scale conserving land important to individual communities and families. Much of our work involves conservation easements, but some occurs through the transfer of land into public ownership – federal, state and municipal or private non-profit ownership. So much of our work hinges on willing sellers, most of them private landowners, so being able to act when opportunities present themselves is key. Access to capital, adequate staff

capacity, willing partners and good prioritization schemes as well as on the ground knowledge are critical to our success.

A couple examples of our work have been in the news the past few weeks

- 1) One is **Worcester Woods conservation project** – early in the new year we announced the successful completion of the second phase (6500 acres in Worcester and Elmore) of a 3 phase conservation effort to conserve over 15,000 acres in the heart of a large block of undeveloped forestland, a wildlife corridor that has international significance - connecting the Green Mountains to the west with the Northeastern Highlands and beyond. This adds to 15,650 contiguous acres of previously conserved land, including the CC Putnam State Forest, VLT-owned Atlas land, and Elmore State Park: one of the larger blocks of intact forestland within this regional linkage area. These lands were stewarded by the Meyer family for over 60 years and their conservation is the product of the partnership between nonprofits, the State of Vermont, federal and private funding sources adjacent landowners, and years of work. A mix of wildland and managed forestland, available forever for recreation, wildlife habitat, carbon sequestration and storage, water quality and flood resilience – it is a wonderful demonstration of what we can do here in VT with good partnership, strategy and adequate funding.  
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- 2) Another is the **256 acre Ashley community Forest** – a first of its kind two-town community forest in the towns of Strafford and Sharon that will be managed by representatives of both towns and this forestland will serve as a resource for educational and recreational activities.

The Alliance for Vermont Communities collaborated with VLT, the towns the Vermont Housing & Conservation Board (VHCB) and dozens of local donors to purchase and protect this forestland. The property had been at the center of Utah resident David Hall’s vision for a 5,000-acre development named New Vistas. That vision was shelved after vehement community opposition. The communities embraced this new vision for the forest.

**Other tools:** The base of conserved land that we continue to build is a critical asset for our state. It’s an important source of belonging, connection, ecological health, climate resilience, and community vitality. But these lands and these landowners must be supported, thoughtfully, to ensure that these lands reach their potential and that people of all backgrounds and economic circumstances benefit from our work. A suite of tools and strategies to increase our impact beyond conservation restrictions are important. These include sound tax strategies and supports, technical and business assistance for landowners, management and restoration incentives and implementation resources to name a few.

**H606:** In speaking specifically to this bill H606 – I want to note that VLT is a member of the Forest Partnership and has participated with that coalition, which is made up of VLT, TNC, Audubon VT, VNRC, TPL and VCV, to review the bill and Jamey Fidel, on behalf of the FP, has already provided specific recommendations in testimony, and submitted in writing. **VLT supports these recommendations already been provided.**

In addition to the FP's formal recommendations, I want to note that there has been excellent testimony the past few weeks speaking to the why and the findings that support this bill. I would note that I liked Eric Sorenson's suggestion of referencing the Staying Connected initiative, of which VLT has been a partner from the start, as well as Jamey Fidel's Vermont specific data that he provided in his testimony

I want to round out my testimony by emphasizing a few points/considerations, based on our experience as the largest easement holder in VT, many of which were raised in the FP's recommendations as well as others such as Eric Sorenson, as well as noting a few things I haven't heard in other testimony already:

**The importance of private landowners** - Given the very large percentage of Vermont that is in private ownership, and it's role in our rural economy and sense of place, our relationships with willing private landowners are and will be the key to our success meeting the conservation goals we set. The bill notes an impending intergenerational transfer of land. Providing landowners with a range of options, incentives and tools will be critical to keep forests as forests in Vermont. It's going to take our whole toolbox, so I encourage embracing that in the spirit of this bill and not just focusing on a single definition or method of success.

**Conservation in all its forms will help us reach our goals – and deferring to ANR to work with a broad array of stakeholders to drill down into the details**

– to inventory, assess and define conservation categories and targets on State, federal, municipal, and private land using Vermont Conservation Design as a guide will be an excellent outcome of this bill, without being too prescriptive as to the definitions at the outset.

Let me give you an example: One thing that I think is important to point out, that has not been brought up in any of the earlier testimony is the role that VT farmland owners and VT's farmland conservation work plays in reaching the goals of VCD. Vermont's farmland owners own and steward more than cropland – Vermont's landscape is a matrix of open land, cropland and pasture, amid our forestland, and intermixed wetlands and riparian areas. An average farm conserved by VLT, with support from VHCB, often includes up to 50% forestland, wetland, and riparian buffer areas. It is important to note that of the 439,000 acres of forestland VLT has conserved, one-quarter was achieved through our farmland conservation work and owned by farmers. The number is actually higher ( a caveat: forestland numbers use the forest block modeling data, which doesn't "see" any

forested portions of less than 20 acres in size – so riparian buffers and other protection under 20 acres aren't counted in that analysis.

**Make sure we address staffing and capacity, costs – both short range and long term – to be able to act now as well as keep our commitments in the future**

I commend you for tasking ANR to work to identify the staffing, capacity and budget needs to reach the goals of a strategic and inclusive conservation plan – this is an important component of the bill if we are to be successful.

Conservation takes time and money and coordination. VT has an excellent conservation framework – we have VCD, we have a deep and experienced group of conservation nonprofits, we have a State ANR committed and steeped in the science, and we have experienced and effective state funding entities like VHCB. Tasking ANR to convene and activate this network is a great outcome of this bill. We can get a lot done focusing on a conservation plan that plays to our collective strengths and identifies gaps.

In particular:

We have faced a chronic lack of forestland conservation dollars – finding ways to leverage federal funds, bolster state and private funding is critical to be successful.

The long term stewardship responsibilities of perpetual CEs cannot be ignored–the commitment to monitoring and enforcing conservation restrictions is significant and must be adequately valued and resourced.

**And this will be a good investment** - In 2018, the Vermont Forest Partnership commissioned TPL to conduct an economic analysis of the return on the State of Vermont's investment in forestland conservation, which found that every state dollar invested in land conservation returns \$9 in natural goods and services.<sup>1</sup>

**In summary** – VLT supports the testimony of many who have come before me these last couple weeks – and the specific recommendations provided by the FP and Eric Sorenson. In short - be broad in our definitions, be inclusive of landowners by supporting a variety of tools and approaches, and use this historic bill to spur us to focus on the resources, input and strategies going forward that can get us to 30 x 30 and 50 x 50.

Thank you.

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