



# Vermont Association of Conservation Districts

*Our Land. Our Water. Our Future.*

TO: Vermont House Committee on Agriculture, Food Resiliency and Forestry  
FROM: Vermont Association of Conservation Districts  
RE: FY24 Budget  
DATE: Monday, February 20, 2023

Dear Chair Durfee,

Thank you for the opportunity to testify in front of the House Committee on Agriculture, Food Resiliency and Forestry on Thursday, January 19. Vermont's 14 Natural Resources Conservation Districts respectfully submit this memo as a follow-up to questions we were asked in your Committee about our [FY24 Budget Request](#). As your Committee works on its budget memo to the House Appropriations Committee, we hope you will keep our funding request in mind and support including the full request of a \$3,000,000 base increase to the Natural Resources Conservation Council's line item within VAAFM's budget. This funding is critical for Vermont's Conservation Districts to carry out our statutory obligations of protecting natural resources in the state of Vermont.

Below is information to help answer key questions that came up during our testimony. Please do not hesitate to reach out with any questions or requests for further information.

## **Relationship between Vermont's Natural Resources Conservation Districts and the USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Services Agency (NRCS)**

One of the primary ways in which Vermont's Natural Resources Conservation Districts are distinct from nonprofit community partners who provide similar services is our unique relationship with NRCS. Collectively, Vermont's Conservation Districts hold over 1,000 written agreements with NRCS which authorize the following functions:

- **Cost-share of office space and technology** - 11 Conservation Districts share an office with NRCS staff and use of NRCS computer systems, and Conservation Districts can hold federal email addresses
- **Access to NRCS data and tools** - Conservation Districts have access to mapping and contracting tools as well as farm data that NRCS uses that are not widely available to outside groups, such as Conservation Desktop. Conservation Desktop (CD) is the core Conservation Delivery Streamlining Initiative (CDSI) application that integrates NRCS's technical and financial information and processes into a common user interface.
- **Facilitate Local Working Groups to inform NRCS funding priorities** - Conservation Districts are the only entity identified in the federal Farm Bill to use the NRCS's local-led framework to host Local Working Groups that influence what NRCS's funding priorities are in different parts of the state.
- **Achieving National Conservation Planner status** - Conservation Districts are invited to attend all NRCS trainings and can achieve formal "Conservation Planner" status from the federal government which enables us to write conservation plans on behalf of landowners according to NRCS standards. Working towards this certification takes 2-3 years, and many Districts have not had the financial resources nor the staff capacity to pursue this training in a meaningful way. The cost to cover that staff time is embedded in our FY24 Budget Request, which will help more Districts achieve this federal certification.
- **Federal-State Cross Participation** - Conservation Districts and NRCS staff cross participate in each other's programming and administration. For example, Conservation Districts are invited to attend regular regional zone meetings held by NRCS, and NRCS staff are obligated to join Conservation District Board meetings.
- **Written Agreements to Share Work** - Conservation Districts hold unique written agreements with the NRCS to be on-the-ground partners for their state goals and work. Here is an example of language from our "Unfunded Cooperative Agreement" with NRCS:

*NRCS will provide access to NRCS equipment, technology, and technical tools to the maximum extent possible to facilitate mission delivery and enable mutually beneficial program outcomes...NRCS will provide access to shared office spaces, where parties can better collaborate to achieve mutually beneficial outcomes and provide improved access and services to customers within the local community.*

It is worth noting that while Vermont's Natural Resources Conservation Districts are critical state partners for NRCS, the federal government does not contribute meaningfully towards operational expenses outside of shared office space and technology. The federal government's support does not include any salary or benefits for staff, travel reimbursements, necessary equipment for on-site technical assistance, etc. We provide valuable services to NRCS in exchange for office space and technology, and that the exchange is generally below a fair market rate for our services. This is especially true now, as our exchange rate does not grow with inflation.

### **Subdivision of Government, Non-Regulatory Status and Elected Leadership**

Vermont's 14 Natural Resources Conservation Districts are subdivisions of state government that were established by landowners through the petitioning process laid out in the [Soil Conservation Act](#) as a response to the Dust Bowl in the 1930s. Conservation Districts operate under the authority of the Vermont Natural Resources Conservation Council (NRCC) which is designated an "agency of the state" under 10 V.S.A. § 703. Each District has a Board of Supervisors who are all local residents elected by the public to that position.\*

Conservation District staff members are non-regulatory government employees who are embedded in the communities they serve. Our uniqueness lies in the neighbor-to-neighbor relationships we have with the landowners we provide services to. We are often the liaison that works directly with landowners to identify and apply to the programs and grants that best meets their needs. These programs and grants are often administered by the VT Agency of Agriculture, Food and Markets, the Agency of Natural Resources, UVM Extension, VHCB, and others, and Conservation Districts act as local outreach. Below are just a few examples of this work:

- **Pay for Performance Program** - Conservation Districts have a contract with VAAFM to implement the new Pay for Performance program at the local level, which is a natural continuation of our role of connecting the farmers and landowners in our communities to opportunities to reduce phosphorus and stormwater runoff, enhance riparian corridors, plant native species, etc.
  - Many of Vermont's Conservation Districts hold community forums to gather public input on town stormwater projects.
  - The White River Conservation District is currently facilitating farmer-led Work Groups specifically to inform the policies being developed around Payment for Ecosystem Services.
- **Vermont Agricultural Water Quality Partnership** - the Vermont Association of Conservation Districts is part of the Vermont Agricultural Water Quality Partnership, which is a formal partnership with an MOU signed between us, USDA-NRCS, USDA Farm Service Agency, US Fish & Wildlife Service, UVM Extension, Vermont Department of Environmental Conservation, VAAFM, VHCB, and the Lake Champlain Basin Program.

\*It is worth noting that actual public elections for Conservation District's Boards of Supervisors do not always happen because it is increasingly rare to get more than one candidate who meets the petition signature requirements. If there is only one eligible candidate, then that person gets seated on the Board by default. It is also common to not get any candidates who meet the petition requirements, which results in a vacancy that is filled by appointment. It is a goal of Vermont's Conservation Districts to attract more candidates for this important role as we increase our visibility across the state. It is a 5-year term to serve on a District's Board of Supervisors, with staggered terms for each Supervisor. [Click here to see a recent news article about the White River Conservation District's Board elections.](#)

### **Difference of Landowner Services between Conservation Districts and Business Planning Advisors**

Vermont's 14 Conservation Districts fill different niches in different parts of the state. Our uniqueness lies in our structural model - we exist everywhere in Vermont, regardless of community resources, providing continuity and access across all regions. Some ways in which we differ from State Agencies and other farm and forest service providers include:

- **We provide a wide range of services.** Our focus is not entirely on business and financial planning, which is often the sole focus of other service providers. When working with a farm or landowner, we are primarily focused on the sustainability of that land and the health of the local ecosystem. We sample soils, collect and transport manure samples, remind folks about regulatory requirements, and help with Nutrient Management Planning. When a farm works with another service provider to write a business plan, that business plan often informs the work that we do with that farm later on.

- **We are non-regulatory.** Often, our presence is more welcomed than the presence of regulatory bodies because the farmers and landowners we work with know that our site visits will never result in violations, fines or fees.
- **We provide long-term, ongoing support.** Conservation Districts will work with a farm before, during, and after other trainings, assessments or business plans provided by other service providers. Many other services focus on a specific project, end goal or point in time for any particular land.
- **We are impartial.** Conservation Districts do not have their own funding programs that we need to promote; we look at all funding available, regardless of its source, and make recommendations based on objective need and best fit. In this way, Conservation Districts act more as a case manager doing referral services rather than a representative for any particular program.
- **We have a preexisting structure that connects local → state → federal levels,** which provides unique opportunities for communication and advocacy. Also, our structure is replicated in other states, so we provide continuity, connection, communication, and parallel structure across state lines. Border Conservation Districts partner closely with Conservation Districts in New Hampshire and New York. We have been doing this work for more than 80 years and are part of the longstanding landscape of agriculture and natural resources conservation in all watersheds covering Vermont and beyond.
- **We are based in our districts.** We don't work statewide as individuals, though we collectively cover the whole state. We are focused on the people in our District and are able to build relationships over long periods of time.
- **We are not for profit and democratically run municipalities.** If constituents aren't satisfied with our services, they hold the power to vote out Supervisors and enact change.

**Below is a case study to highlight where Conservation Districts fit into the overall universe of services and technical assistance to working landscapes:**

The Franklin County Natural Resources Conservation District recently met a farmer at an event hosted by the District regarding grant opportunities for on-farm equipment. After meeting him at the event, the District Manager realized that they had been trying to get a hold of the farmer to help with the farm's Nutrient Management Plan because it was out of date (this is known using the NRCS farm data). Meeting at the event allowed the District to start working with this farm, and they were able to help enroll the farmer in the Regional Conservation Partnership Program's Nutrient Management Planning (NMP). While enrolled in this program, the Franklin County Natural Resources Conservation District completed the farm's Land Treatment Plan and helped coach the farmer through the NMP course with UVM Extension. Franklin Conservation District staff has since worked with the farmer on two grant applications - one for a grant administered by VAAFM and another by VHCB - to secure funding for a piece of equipment that the farm needs. Conservation Districts help navigate and understand those grant processes at the hyper local level. The Nutrient Management Plan written with the support of District staff will help this farm achieve Organic certification.

Please do not hesitate to reach out with any questions.

Sincerely,



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## APPENDIX A - TESTIMONIALS FROM THE PEOPLE WE SERVE

*"It cannot be overstated how much the Vermont Land Trust relies on Conservation Districts to maintain our farmland conservation program; many projects simply would not meet water quality thresholds without their help. Please make this investment and keep this lean, high-functioning, water-quality partner strong and nimble."*

- Donald Campbell, Vermont Land Trust, January 2022

*"The conservation districts provide incredibly helpful programs for farms like mine. Access to equipment, educational opportunities and on-farm conservation projects just to name a few. VACD helps farmers make gradual, often financially helpful transitions to practices that better conserve the farm's land and water resources."*

-Brian Joseph Leach, Haystack Farmstead, Pawlet, February 2023

*"Our local Conservation District's assistance is instrumental in helping us maintain our 6th generation VT farm. We would be lost without them."*

-Jeremy Russo, Southwind Farm, Sudbury, February 2023

*"I think it is wonderful that funds are being allocated to conservation opportunities across the state--they are needed. However, these opportunities are not always intuitive, and our farmers' time is scarce to take the time to interpret and apply. VACD not only builds a bridge to cross these gaps, but they help farmers advocate for what is needed."*

-Carissa Stein, Carissa Stein Consulting, Enosburg Falls, February 2023

*"The Conservative Districts are vital to connecting farmers with funding sources for water quality and other projects and are currently under or unfunded."*

-Paul Doton, Doton Farm LLC, Barnard, February 2023

*"I support VACD because the funding of Conservation Districts is vital to community. Traditionally underfunded districts have potential to increase engagement in natural resources and agriculture crucial to the health and wellness of the environment. Please recognize this opportunity for Vermont to fund necessary projects supporting the conservation of resources and thus, the fabric of community, the local economy, increasing meaningful job opportunities and together working towards a viable and healthy future."*

-Karen Ganey, Regeneration Corps, February 2023

*"Franklin County and Grand Isle Natural Resources Conservation District Services have outstanding staff that serve as one of FNLC's most vital allies when working with private residents and farms to bring practical Best Management Practices to reduce nonpoint phosphorus loss into the northern arm of Lake Champlain. We have co-hosted community outreach events on subjects ranging from shoreline stormwater management to drone demonstrations and visit farms and residential property together on a regular basis. FNLC considers FCNRCD and GICNRCD to be one of the first services that we work with when addressing non-regulatory land use problems. Another vital service that the Conservation Districts in NW Vermont are providing is leadership on Basin Water Quality Councils. I serve on three BWQC's and a Conservation Executive Director is serving as Chair on each of these Councils. This added function alone should qualify the Conservation Districts for more funding considering the added service that they are providing to attain the EPA TMDL goals."*

-Dr. Kent E Henderson, Board Chair, Friends of Northern Lake Champlain, January 2023

*"Please support our Natural Resources Conservation Districts with much needed financial aid. Like many other commissions around the state, the Richford Conservation Commission relies on their personnel and resources in promoting conservation of our natural resources and education about natural resources for our community."*

-Annette Goyne, Richford Conservation Commission, February 2023