



**Testimony to the House Commerce and Economic Development Committee
February 16, 2024**

For the record, I'm Kelly Ault, Executive Director of the Vermont Outdoor Business Alliance (also known as VOBA). Thank you for inviting me to speak in support of the VOREC community grant program and about its positive impact on opportunities for the outdoor workforce and business development.

VOBA is a state-wide nonprofit organization established in 2018 with a mission to strengthen Vermont's outdoor economy. Our 135 outdoor businesses provide products and services to Vermonters and visitors, as well as work together to foster entrepreneurship, career pathways, and sector branding. VOBA supports the natural and recreation resources we depend on for our livelihood and members are dedicated to advancing equitable access for all in work places and outdoor spaces.

VOBA has worked closely with VOREC over the years in growing businesses and we fully support the VOREC grant program for the demonstrated value of its investments in dozens of communities across the state. These communities in turn, evolve into outdoor destinations that precipitate the growth and relocation of businesses, as well as the attraction and retention of outdoor professionals. A recent example is Mavic, a global cycling manufacturer that brought their North American headquarters to Waterbury to leverage the knowledge of local cyclists in informing their product innovation and technology. They also believe that easy access to the outdoors will support their future workforce expansion.

VOBA received a VOREC grant to support workforce development for technical occupations as well as to provide technical assistance to startups that were ready to scale up. We've been able to use the grant funds to address the pervasive challenge of companies in hiring skilled labor for much needed seasonal jobs that offer better wages, as well as to invest in the career advancement of year-round employees, leading to higher salary and compensation. VOBA's initiative has focused on the twin trades of bicycle mechanics and trail construction.

VOBA's initiative has also launched Vermont's outdoor gear, apparel, and accessory manufacturers towards expansion in markets, operations, and financial viability, leading to production in Vermont and products that enable access and enjoyment of the outdoors.

Although work will continue through 2024, our VOREC grant has allowed us to make progress in three areas which support Vermont's communities now and into the future:

1. VOBA established a partnership with Vermont State University to launch the first ever Sustainable Trail Building Certificate through the Lyndon campus last September for 15 students. The curriculum was informed by trail builders and will result in knowledge and skills of stewardship and maintenance. A cohort of trail building businesses and organizations will provide employment for graduates this spring and the 2024-2025 certificate will include a 100 hour "trail-ship" in the spring of 2025.
2. VOBA organized a cohort of 50 outdoor retailers around the shared need for bicycle mechanics to service the growing market from the visitor economy as well as local customers. VOBA's certificate program is the first Vermont industry-led professional development and career exploration training program. It will launch this spring in Burlington and Killington and include employer networking and job placement in local shops. Our goals are to expand the geographic clusters, provide ladder credentials in advanced skills, and explore an apprenticeship that includes ski techs.
3. VOBA's Gear and Apparel Manufacturers Network involves 50 companies and has nurtured collaborations to expand business opportunities and elevate Vermont's outdoor brand. VOBA's workshops and consultancies have supported goals in finance, sales, marketing, and production through brand positioning for festivals and trade shows, resulting in access to consumers and retailers. A business strategy workshop with emerging brands will further define their execution strategy for future success.

In closing, the network of outdoor companies - large and small - touches every community in the state, supporting Vermonters and visitors in getting outside and enjoying what our natural and recreational resources offer. Programs like the VOREC community grant program provides a guaranteed return on investment on growing our state and local economies as driven by consistent participation in outdoor recreation.

The current climate resiliency conversations provide timely reminders that now is the time to invest in our recreation infrastructure that is based in stewardship practices and now is the time to invest in our businesses that can innovate and adapt to a changing landscape. The VOREC community program is a vital tool to all our efforts to ensure Vermont's prosperous future.

Thank you for your time on Outdoor Recreation Day!