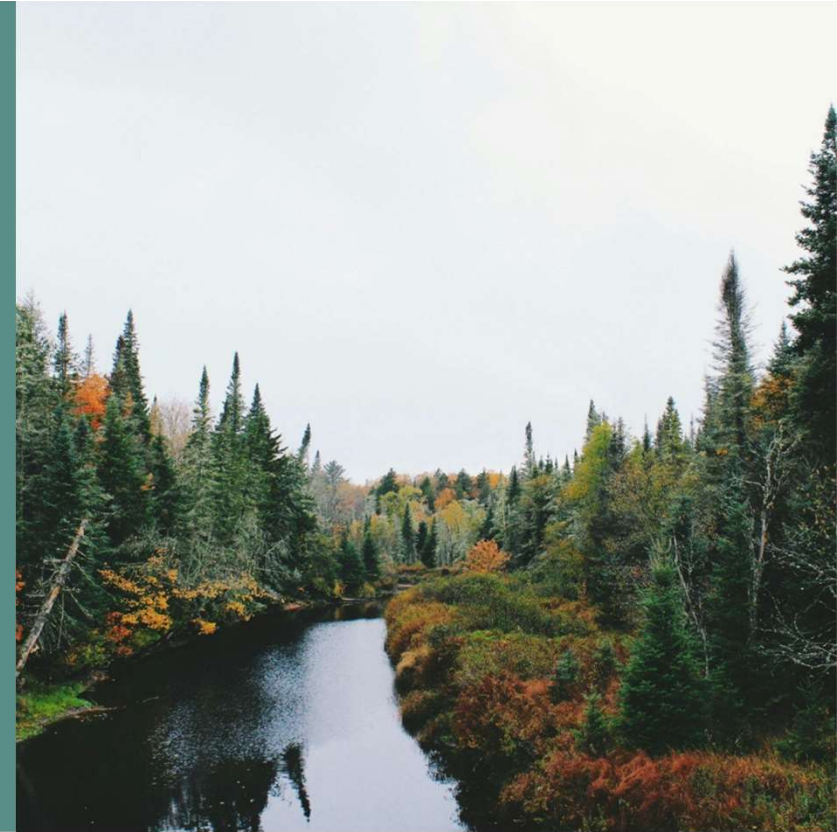


# Vermont Conservation Inventory

Report Overview for House Committee on  
Environment and Energy



# A Vision for Vermont

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In 2023, The Community Resilience and Biodiversity Protection Act set forth a vision to maintain an ecologically functional landscape that:

- Sustains biodiversity
- Maintains landscape connectivity
- Supports watershed health
- Promotes climate resilience
- Supports working farms and forests
- Provides opportunities for recreation and appreciation of the natural world *and*
- Supports the historic settlement pattern of compact villages surrounded by rural lands and natural areas.



# Who Contributed?

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## Lead Organizations:



## Partner Organizations:

- Vermont Land Trust
- The Nature Conservancy of Vermont
- Trust for Public Land
- Audubon Vermont
- State Natural Resources Conservation Council
- Vermont Association of Conservation Districts

47

Interviews

November '23 - February '24

Community members interviewed to complete inventory

21

Focus Groups

March '24 - May '24

Affinity-based focus groups with over **350 participants**

6

Public Meetings

Nov '23 - July '24

Meetings open to the public with opportunities for public feedback

147

Survey Respondents

November '23 - February '24

Open to the general public and on the VHCB website

4

Working Groups

November '23 - June '24

Working groups to answer three specific questions posed by the legislature

# The Timeline

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## **Phase 1. Conservation Inventory - due July 2024**

An assessment of existing and potential conservation data, practices, programs, equity, and funding with recommended next steps



## **Phase 2. Conservation Plan - due December 2025**

A comprehensive strategy for achieving the vision and goals of the Community Resilience and Biodiversity Protection Act



## **Phase 3. Implementation. 2026 - 2050**

- 30% of Land Conserved by 2030
- 50% of Land Conserved by 2050

# The Annexes

## Table of Contents

<b>Annex 1: Conservation Categories and Agriculture</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>A. Conservation Categories Summary</b>	<b>3</b>
What Lands Count Towards the Goals?	3
The Criteria of Conserved Land Categorization	5
The Mix and Conversion of Conserved Land Categories	6
Permanence and Adaptability	8
<b>A. Conservation Categories Working Group Report</b>	<b>9</b>
Conservation Category Definitions in Statute	11
Workgroup Recommendations	11
Interpretations of Key, Repeated Terms	13
Conservation Category Interpretations	14
Interaction with Data Protocols	18
Conclusion: Areas of Future Work	18
<b>A. Conservation Categories Survey Themes</b>	<b>20</b>
Question 4	20
Question 5	21
Question 7	22
<b>A. Conservation Categories Interview Themes</b>	<b>23</b>
What Counts as Conserved?	23
Category Mix and Prioritization	24
Ecological Reserve & Biodiversity Conservation Areas	24
Natural Resource Management Area	25
Agriculture and Water Intersections	25
<b>B. Agriculture Summary</b>	<b>26</b>
What Types of Agriculture Lands Support Biodiversity and Conservation Outcomes?	26
Where does Agriculture Fit into the Categories?	27
<b>B. Agricultural Lands Working Group Report</b>	<b>29</b>
Membership	29
The Process	29
Recommendations	29
The Holistic Agricultural Context	31
Findings of the Agricultural Lands Working Group	31
Conclusions	43
<b>B. Agriculture Survey Themes</b>	<b>46</b>
	1

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wanted to see a focus on quality over quantity broadly. This both meant prioritizing high conservation value land over achieving quantity both in practice and in policy decisions, urgency even if we are close to the 30x30 goal, going beyond the labels of what is and isn't legally conserved land, and supporting stewardship.

- **Focus Groups:** Participants across focus groups noted that how we define conservation in Vermont matters and will shape and guide this conservation plan. As the below sub-sections show, there are conflicting — and at times, potentially complementary — definitions of conservation in Vermont.

### Recommendations

**Use Vermont Conservation Design to share priority lands for conservation to be filtered locally through community processes.** Stakeholders wanted to see a prioritization of lands that had high conservation values. [Vermont Conservation Design](#) (VCD) identifies lands and waters across Vermont that are of highest priority for maintaining ecological integrity. Together, these lands comprise a connected landscape of large and intact forested habitat, healthy aquatic and riparian systems, and a full range of physical features (bedrock, soils, elevation, slope, and aspect) on which plant and animal natural communities depend. These priority lands can be reviewed for feasibility and community input at a sub-state level as well as across other prioritizations to develop a full prioritization of lands that meet ecological and community-based criteria for priority lands.

### Enhancing Stakeholder Engagement, Equitable Participation, and Diversity of Perspectives

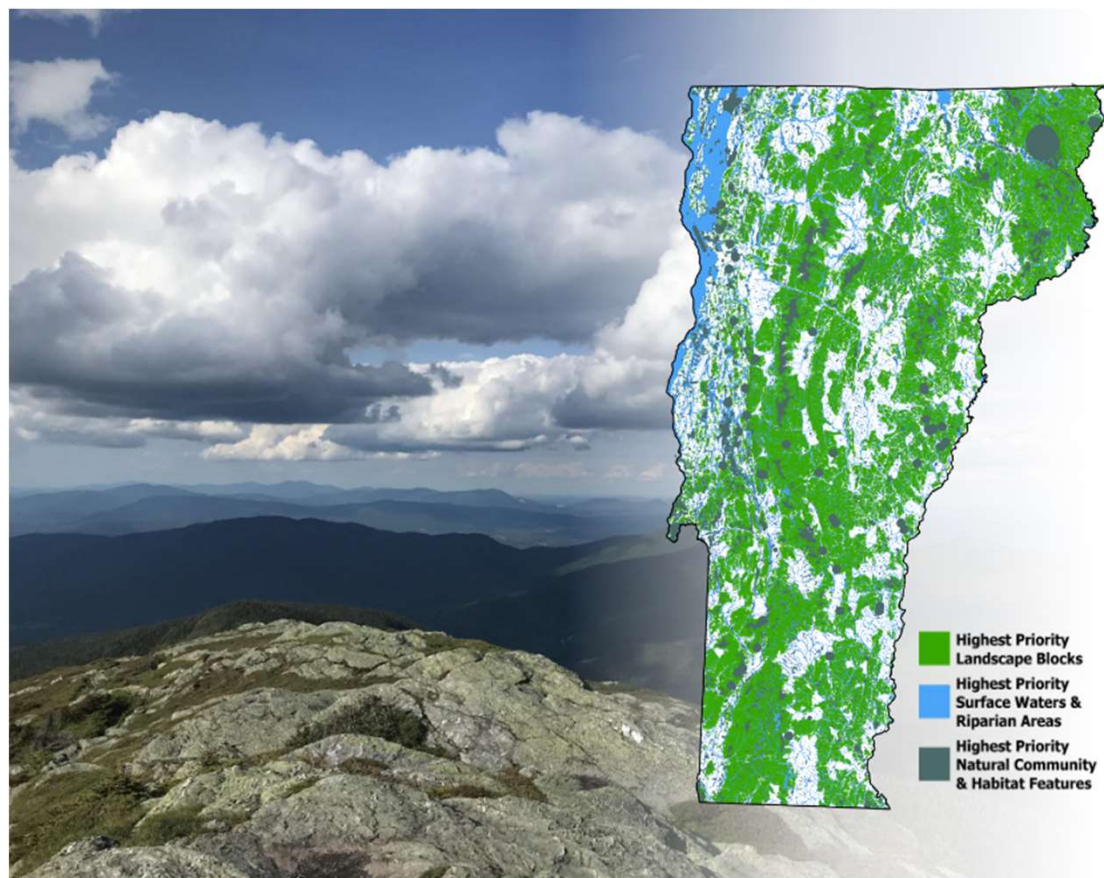
- **Survey Respondents: [What is going well.](#)** A culture of conservation, recreation, and land stewardship is identified as a significant part of Vermont's identity. This cultural value is seen as

Each Annex includes:

- A Summary and Recommendations of what we learned through our process, followed by N4J's recommendations
- An-depth section for each collection method (as applicable) with an in-depth summary of what we heard from the the working group, surveys, interviews, and focus groups, interviews including direct quotes for the interviews and focus groups
- Workgroup reports where developed

# Vermont Conservation Design

- Provides a science-based conservation vision for Vermont
- Identifies the most important places for maintaining an ecologically functional and resilient landscape
- Available to everyone on the BioFinder website:  
<https://www.biofinder.vt.gov/>



Mount Mansfield State Forest

# Vermont Conservation Design

- Already used by ANR and conservation partners to guide work
- Successful implementation of VCD involves the full spectrum of conservation and stewardship activities, not just land protection
- Listed as a key tool for guiding action and planning under Act 59
- Will be used to guide planning effort moving forward



Bloodroot flowers at Niquette Bay State Park



# How VCD can help moving forward?

- Understand how our existing conserved lands contribute to maintaining biodiversity and ecological function
- Identify opportunities for restoration, management, and enhancement on conserved lands
- Identify the places best suited for additional protection
- Guide future conservation efforts



ANR Conservation Project with Highest Priority Surface Water and Riparian Area

# How ANR Uses VCD to advance goals of Act 59



Mount Mansfield State Forest, Underhill

## To guide management of State Lands

- State lands are managed for many values, including recreation, wildlife habitat, hydrology, forest resources, etc.
- Use VCD to balance those values and inform management designations, such as Highly Sensitive Areas.
- Guides specific management actions, like protecting old forest, creating young forest, or maintaining grassland.
- Inform how State lands interface with other interests and private lands, such as to strategically protect wildlife road crossings.
- State lands will be critical to achieving our conservation goals.

# How ANR Uses VCD to advance goals of Act 59



Wetland on ANR conservation project

## To guide land conservation efforts

- Identify, review and prioritize potential conservation projects
- Prioritize conservation funding and resources

## To prioritize work through other programs and projects that do not result in permanent legal land protection

- Technical assistance to landowners
- Local municipal planning
- Watershed planning

# Beyond Biodiversity

- VCD sustains other values: Working farms and forests, outdoor recreation, clean water, scenic values, climate resilience.
- Helps identify appropriate places for housing and other forms of development.
- Provides a landscape-level perspective across ownerships, towns, and regions.
- Can be combined with other tools and maps.
- Equitable application of VCD must also include robust public engagement, and consideration of both ecological and human needs.



# Environmental Justice

- Act 154 of 2022, Vermont's Environmental Justice (EJ) Law, works to ensure all Vermonters have equitable access to environmental benefits and protects communities from disproportionate environmental burdens such as limited access to green spaces.
- The EJ Law requires State agencies to meaningfully engage Vermonters in the environmental decision-making processes.
- VHCB and ANR see EJ and equity as core to our respective missions and are committed to an inclusive process for all stages of Act 59 implementation.





Wolcott Community Forest



## Statutory Purpose

“The dual goals of creating affordable housing for Vermonters, and conserving and protecting Vermont’s agricultural land, forestland, historic properties, important natural areas, and recreational lands of primary importance to the economic vitality and quality of life of the State.”

10 V.S.A.15 §302

An aerial photograph of a golf course and a large lake. The golf course is a bright green strip running through a dense forest of trees with some autumn-colored foliage. The lake is on the right side, with sunlight reflecting off its surface. The sky is blue with scattered white clouds.

# Equity and Inclusion

Camp Sunrise, Benson/Orwell

# Floodplain Restoration



Whetstone Brook Floodplain Restoration



# Community Resilience



Water Street Park: Northfield



Choiniere Family Farm

1999

# Landscape Resilience



2015



Farm Retirement at the Maidstone Bends

# Vibrant Communities



Huntington Town Forest

# Question 1

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A review of the three conservation categories defined in section 2801 of this title and suggestions for developing any modifications or additions to these categories that maintain or complement the core concepts of ecological reserve areas, biodiversity conservation areas, and natural resource management areas in order to complete the conserved land inventory and inform the comprehensive strategy in the conservation plan. As part of this review, criteria shall be developed to determine the types of agricultural lands that will qualify as supporting and restoring biodiversity and therefore count towards the natural resource management area category.

## Recommendations

- No changes are recommended to the current definitions of the conservation categories.
- VHCB recommends including currently conserved agricultural lands in the Natural Resources Management Category.
- Differentiate lands within the Natural Resource Management Area category as “Forestland and other Natural Cover,” which includes habitat blocks and riparian connectivity blocks, and “Agricultural and Open Land,” which includes agricultural lands and other working lands that do not qualify as forestland or natural cover.
- Continue to refine our interpretations and working guidelines for the conservation categories and other statutory definitions in Phase II of this process; and likewise work with stakeholders to reconsider and describe the three (or four) conservation categories based on their assigned name, functions and values, rather than their numerical hierarchy.
- Continue analysis of the Uncategorized Conserved Lands to determine which of those lands should be included in the next inventory as counting towards the Act 59 2030 goal, under one of the existing categories or in a new fourth category.

# Question 2

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The amount of conserved land in Vermont that fits into each of the three conservation categories defined in section 2801 of this title, including public and private land. The inventory shall also include other lands permanently protected from development by fee ownership or subject to conservation easements.

Overview of initial data:

- Conserved land in Ecological Reserve Areas: 236,739 acres, or 4% of land area.
- Conserved land in Biodiversity Conservation Areas: 239,545 acres, or 4% of land area.
- Conserved land in Natural Resource Management Areas: 1,106,473 acres, or 19% of land area.
  - NRMA - Forestland or Natural Cover: 933,813 acres, or 16% of land area.
  - NRMA - Agriculture and Open Land: 172,660 acres, or 3% of land area.
- Total land across all three categories: 1,582,757 acres, or 27% of land area.
- Uncategorized Conserved Lands (for further analysis): 47,595 acres, or 1% of land area.

# Question 3 and 7

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A summary of the totality of conservation practices, both permanent and intermediate, available for reaching the goals of this chapter, including what they are, what they do, how they contribute, and what metrics are available to quantify them.

## Recommendations:

- Form a Phase II work group focused on how conservation practices and programs can be best deployed, measured, and expanded to meet the goals of the Act, including:
  - Investments across all three (four) conservation categories defined in Act 59, consistent with the values and goals of VCD and the vision of Act 59
  - Additional focus on the logistics and processes to designate ecological reserve areas on State lands
  - Review of opportunities to prioritize ecological health, biodiversity and community resilience on working lands
  - Review of opportunities to increase protection for water resources and aquatic health, including flood resilience, with public conservation funding
  - Review of opportunities to expand and diversify participants and beneficiaries consistent with goals for equity and inclusion
- Use Phase II to identify and evaluate new conservation stewardship and management practices, funding mechanisms for practices, and/or incentives such as private carbon markets or biodiversity markets, including how to evaluate what will be most effective, ethical and equitable for Vermont landowners
- Refine and/or develop metrics to measure the outcomes of investments made specific to meeting the Act's goals

# Question 4

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An assessment of how State lands will be used to increase conserved ecological reserve areas.

## Recommendations:

- Work with State lands management staff and stakeholders to consider and develop guidelines for a new permanent statutory designation called “Ecological Reserve.”
- Create new land management sub-classes, called “Ecological Representation Areas” and “Reserve Development Areas.”
- Utilize landscape-scale conservation planning analyses to inform the designation of Ecological Reserves on State lands.
- Work with VHCB and partners to identify, pilot and adopt alternative easement models for State fee land acquisitions, including different legal mechanisms to protect public investment in land conservation through VHCB, while streamlining or reducing the stewardship obligations for private non-profit entities.
- Work with the State Forest Stewardship Coordinating Committee to evaluate the role the Forest Legacy Program can play in increasing the number of conserved Ecological Reserves.

# Question 5

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The implementation methods that could be utilized for achieving the goals of this chapter using Vermont Conservation Design as a guide.

## Recommendations:

- During Phase II, evaluate current and potential programs and practices and assess the opportunities and challenges each program and practice presents, as well as its potential to protect land and parcels that contribute to the ecological functionality of each specific element of VCD (e.g. interior forest blocks, connectivity blocks, riparian areas, natural communities, old and young forests, etc.).
- Conduct a spatial assessment of the conserved lands inventory relative to the priority and highest priority elements identified in VCD. For the purposes of meeting the 30% and 50% goals of Act 59, this assessment could start identifying intermediate conservation steps, such as how to address, expand, and further protect lands enrolled in Vermont's Use Value Appraisal program.
- Undertake a gap analysis to identify where priority lands identified under VCD are not conserved and could benefit from additional conservation action, stewardship investment or management incentive; including investments in restoration, enhancement, and reconnection of landscape functions that could take place on existing conserved lands to better meet VCD's goal of ecological health.



# Question 6

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A review of how aquatic systems are currently conserved or otherwise protected in the State, including a description of the benefits land conservation provides for aquatic systems, whether this is sufficient to maintain aquatic system functions and services, and how the implementation methods for achieving the goals of this chapter using Vermont Conservation Design as a guide would include specific strategies for protecting aquatic system health.

## Recommendations:

- Work with the broad set of stakeholders focused on aquatic health to identify additional capacity needed to more effectively conserve aquatic systems, as well as conduct outreach and education to land owners about incentives and technical support available to help them contribute to the health of their watershed.
- Consider how to increase and/or mandate additional resource protections for aquatic systems on newly conserved lands funded with public dollars. Also, explore incentives and management strategies to encourage additional protections for aquatic systems on already conserved properties.
- Collaborate with Phase II stakeholders to evaluate how we can include watershed scale and network-based approaches to conservation that would support both terrestrial and aquatic systems.
- Explore how landowner incentives for short term management designations or tax incentive programs (like UVA) could better incent and prioritize aquatic system health.
- Identify opportunities to collaborate among public programs, using conservation work to support and enhance the State's other clean water initiatives, regulatory and incentive programs.

# Question 8

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An assessment of existing funding and recommendations for new funding sources that will be needed for acquisition of land, purchase or donation of conservation easements, staffing capacity, and long-term stewardship to meet the goals.

## Recommendations:

- We recommend that VHCB and ANR meet with legislative leaders from committees of jurisdiction prior to the 2025 Legislative Session in order to: (1) discuss budget needs for Phase II work, and (2) project ANR and VHCB budgets for SFYs 2025-2030 with sufficient capacity and match to draw down Federal funding and attract private funding needed meet the goals and vision of Act 59.
- We recommend forming two workgroups to support a statewide advisory committee for our Phase II process, including a group that will be focused on prioritizing the funding, financing and market solutions needed for Act 59 implementation. The work of this group will help us to:
  - develop a long term plan to support and expand capacity, find matching funding for state and federal funding sources, and identify the capacity needed to sustain increased conservation outcomes through 2050 and beyond;
  - work with foundations and philanthropists to build a collaborative funding model with integrated goals, mutual awareness and support to enable public-private partnerships to flourish;
  - identify, carefully vet and adapt market-based models and financing tools to support Vermont's conservation mission effectively, ethically, and equitably;
  - develop and refine opportunities to more efficiently administer programs and carry out land conservation in support of Act 59 vision and goals, without increasing public and private costs;
  - address the foundational need to address the real costs of adequate data collection, management and governance for ongoing inventory of Vermont's conserved landscape; and
  - bring additional focus to the overlapping and distinct goals and outcomes of Act 59 with Act 250, Vermont's new river corridor protection law, Vermont's UVA program, and other programs that advance these shared values.

# Question 9

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An equity assessment of existing land protection and conservation strategies and programs.

## Recommendations:

- Commit resources to engage with the Land Access and Opportunity Board, the Environmental Justice Advisory Council, representatives from rural communities, the forest products sector, Vermont Traditions Coalition, and representatives from other under-represented groups in Phase II process.
- Consider how decision-making roles can be diversified, conservation actors representing marginalized communities can receive more investment, and community engagement can be inclusive, meaningful and collaborative across viewpoints.
- Work with LAOB and the EJ Advisory Council (and others) to develop and implement a curriculum for BIPOC, low-income and other marginalized communities to understand the conservation landscape.
- Develop and use metrics and benchmarks to track progress towards more inclusive processes, equitable outcomes, and increased viewpoint diversity.
- Set aside resources and supports to engage and include the perspective of Vermont's Indigenous community, including members of Vermont's recognized tribes and others living in our state.
- Acknowledge and support solutions from the Indigenous community to address, however possible, the contentious and difficult issues raised by members of the Odenak Nation regarding Vermont's recognition process.
- Include focus on alternative models for conservation that facilitate community-owned and cooperatively managed conserved lands and rural enterprise.

# Question 10

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An evaluation of the opportunities related to intergenerational land transfer trends and how the State could proactively direct resources to achieve conservation at the time of transfer.

## Recommendations:

- Use and update earlier analyses and plans to identify the best current tactics to promote intergenerational transfer of lands.
- Direct resources to promote intergenerational land transfer through existing programs targeting these opportunities, such as VHCB's Farm and Forest Viability Program and the Use Value Appraisal Program.
- Provide additional training opportunities for conservation and land use professionals and expand outreach to Vermont's landowners.
- Identify and implement opportunities to fund direct supports to landowners to support long-term stewardship planning for conservation outcomes.



# Next Steps

**July 19:** public stakeholders to provide written comments on Inventory

**August 30:** Finalized Inventory submitted to legislature

**Summer/Fall 2024:** VHCB to hire project manager, form steering committee and work groups, set foundation for regional listening sessions and work group inputs

**Spring 2025:** regional listening sessions, work group

**Summer 2025:** develop draft plan based on work group and listening session recommendations

**Fall 2025:** Public review and finalization of plan



## Immediate Needs for Next Steps

- Funding to facilitate regional listening session process described in Inventory as goal for Phase II
- Funding for ongoing data analysis, governance, design, etc.
- Funding for ANR to continue role in consultation with VHCB
- Delayed due date for Conservation Plan to June 30, 2026
- Long-term planning for increased budgets to support organizational capacity, acquisition and stewardship



# Questions and Discussion