

Julie Moore, ANR Secretary

Remarks to House Environment and Energy Cmte on H.126

February 7, 2023

- Good afternoon.
- I am pleased to join you today to talk about H.126 and am joined by John Austin, who is the Lands and Habitat Program Manager in the Department of Fish and Wildlife and Becca Washburn, who is the Director of Lands Administration and Recreation in the Department of Forests, Parks and Recreation
- My intention this afternoon is to provide some brief remarks on the nexus between the work envisioned by H.126 and existing Agency-led efforts, and then then turn to John and Becca who can speak much more meaningfully to the Agency's conservation work
- I would also encourage the Committee to hear from Bob Zaino, with the Fish & Wildlife Department, as you continue your work... Bob is a Natural Community Ecologist and has a leading role in the Agency's on-going work around Vermont Conservation Design, which is obviously integral to the vision of H.126

FRAMING

- Although the focus of this bill is on permanent protection, it is very important that we think broadly about the full range of conservation options; Conservation comes in many forms and it is important to ensure a shared definition conservation
- 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
 - The Agency uses the word Conservation in referring to the suite of tools and practices we use to provide support to landowners in making decisions about how to manage and steward their land

- Approximately 80% of Vermont's landscape is privately owned and so this work is critical to ensure ecological function and a landscape that is resilient in the face of a changing climate
 - Land acquisition and legal protection are one, a massively important one, but only one tool/practice.
- 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 → we are actively participating in the VHCB-led work that is currently underway and I know Trey Martin spoke to in his testimony in front of this committee last week.
- Role of Vermont Conservation Design
 - VCD 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
 - And conservation in all of its forms is very important if we are to implement the targets of Vermont Conservation Design and maintain an ecologically functional landscape.

AREAS FOR DISCUSSION

- Bill would establish, in statute, three types of areas that would meet the purposes of the H.126
 - Ecological reserve areas, for which the poster child is presumably old growth forests but also includes other vulnerable parts of our ecologically functional landscape
 - Biodiversity conservation areas which are really focused on core habitats and highest priority natural communities; and
 - Natural resource management areas that are intended to be available for sustainable forest management.
- Emphasis on permanent conservation, particularly in the definitions, feels unnecessarily narrow
 - Although the proposed findings for the bill recognize that a full range of conservation approaches are needed - including supporting private landowner education and voluntary programs, technical assistance,

and programs (which include ecological performance contract programs through NRCS like EQUIP and WRP, payment for ecosystem services programs, the highly successful Use value Appraisal program, and other durable programs that deter or prevent conversion of our natural and working lands to development for a period of time), as well as permanent tools such as conservation easements that promote sustainable forest management, and conservation easements and fee acquisitions focused on passive management - to achieve our shared goals around ecological function and connectivity – the planning effort that would be undertaken in response to the bill appears to be directed to rely exclusively on permanent conservation and neglect consideration of the other approaches referenced in the findings.

- And while the bill direct that the plan review the conservation categories and suggest modifications or additions to these categories.
- Presumably any such recommendations would require further legislative action making unclear how proposed changes should be reflected in the planning effort
- As you will hear from John and Becca, while permanent conservation is an important tool – but far from our only tool
 - 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

- And when it comes to permanent conservation, 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

CONCLUSION

Will conclude where I started... Conservation is a core component of the Agency's work. While 30 by 30 conservation of land and water is a useful slogan and direction, but 30 percent conservation is not a number driven by science. The Agency has been and remains committed playing a leading role in conservation initiatives in Vermont, and will turn things over to John and Becca to talk more about this work.