



Vermont Association of Conservation Districts

Our Land. Our Water. Our Future.

To: House Agriculture Committee

From: Michelle Monroe, Executive Director, Vermont Association of Conservation Districts

Re: Impacts of federal actions on provision of assistance to farmers and other landowners

November 14, 2025

Conservation districts were created in the 1930s alongside the Soil Conservation Service, the predecessor agency to the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), to serve as local partners for the new agency. Districts are often located in NRCS offices, and use NRCS equipment and vehicles to assist NRCS with its work.

In Vermont, the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) has lost approximately 48% of its staff since January 20, 2025. The staff losses were concentrated among new staff at the beginning of their careers and senior staff who were at or close to retirement. This comes after the state conservationist had focused heavily on bringing the agency up to full staffing after several years of being understaffed.

Engineering

Engineering was the most heavily hit area of staffing, with NRCS losing both experienced engineers and new hires at the beginning of their careers. The loss of engineers has set back projects across the state.

For farms this has meant delays in projects from bank stabilization on farms located along the Winooski River to irrigation systems in Bennington County.

Using a combination of state and federal funds VACD has hired an engineer based in the Rutland NRCS office to work directly with NRCS on engineering projects on farms, with a focus on projects on small and medium-sized farms, including drought and flood mitigation efforts.

The Emergency Watershed Program (EWP) funds projects addressing immediate threats to buildings, roads, or public safety. As a result of the 2023 and 2024 flooding, NRCS currently has 150 EWP projects in 60 Vermont municipalities. However, the engineer who for decades oversaw these projects accepted the deferred resignation program. NRCS has diverted engineering resources to these projects, but those staff simply aren't as familiar with the requirements of the program, which slows projects. It also moves engineers from other flood and drought mitigation work.

GIS Staff

On November 3, VACD hired a GIS Specialist to work with NRCS. This is a position the state conservationist had identified as a critical vacancy, but which NRCS itself couldn't fill because of the hiring freeze.

The GIS Specialist supports the work of the field staff in a variety of ways, including developing and maintaining mapping and other tools for use in the field.

VACD also employs two GIS technicians who work with NRCS. By having a GIS Specialist take on the bulk of the GIS work, we will be able to have those staff focus on assisting the wetlands and engineering teams.

Wetlands

The loss of staff at NRCS in Vermont left just one person working on wetlands easements for much of 2025, a VACD staff person who took on new responsibilities for monitoring and managing existing wetlands easements in addition to her regular duties of easement outreach, education and recruitment.

Program Management

NRCS relies on program assistants to process all applications and contracts correctly. At the start of the year, NRCS employed five program assistants and VACD employed four. NRCS lost three of its program assistants. In both the St. Albans and Middlebury offices, the number of program assistants dropped from two to one. With the reduction in program management capacity, VACD's program assistants took on a much larger workload.

Conservation Planners

NRCS also lost conservation planners across the state, with the largest losses in the Newport, Middlebury and Rutland offices. Two conservation districts have added 0.5 FTEs to assist with the workload in Southern Vermont. VACD shifted one of its state-funded conservation planners to work on certifications in Addison County part-time.

Across the state the districts and VACD employ a combined 17 conservation planners who work with NRCS. This capacity has been more essential than ever with the cuts at NRCS.

We are actively working on finding the funds to add more staff to meet the need for engineering and conservation planning around the state.

We want to express our appreciation to the Vermont Agency of Agriculture, Farms and Markets, which has been flexible with funding to help us fund positions and move staff to where the need is greatest.

This is also one of the reasons the \$862,000 the districts received from the legislature for FY26 is so essential. It provides flexible funding districts can use to meet needs as they arise. The districts are seeking to replicate that funding this year.

Loss of Regional Conservation Partnership Program grant

The administration included in a previous briefing for the Joint Fiscal Committee the loss of \$8 million in financial assistance for farmers and other landowners. This was a Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCP) grant held by the Department of Environmental Conservation focused on flood mitigation on both agricultural and forested lands. It was cancelled on September 30. DEC is appealing.

VACD had staff actively working with farmers to develop projects and applications for this funding. Redstart, a company that provides forestry services, had 90 forestry applications in development. While the farm projects can move to regular NRCS funding, that is harder to do with the forestry projects because NRCS currently has only two foresters on staff and without the state paying Redstart's foresters to do the planning and project development for the NRCS applications, it is unclear how that work will be done.