



Conservation Planning for Vermont's Future: Act 59

House Environment Committee
January 28, 2026

Presenters:

Gus Seelig

Executive Director

Annie Decker

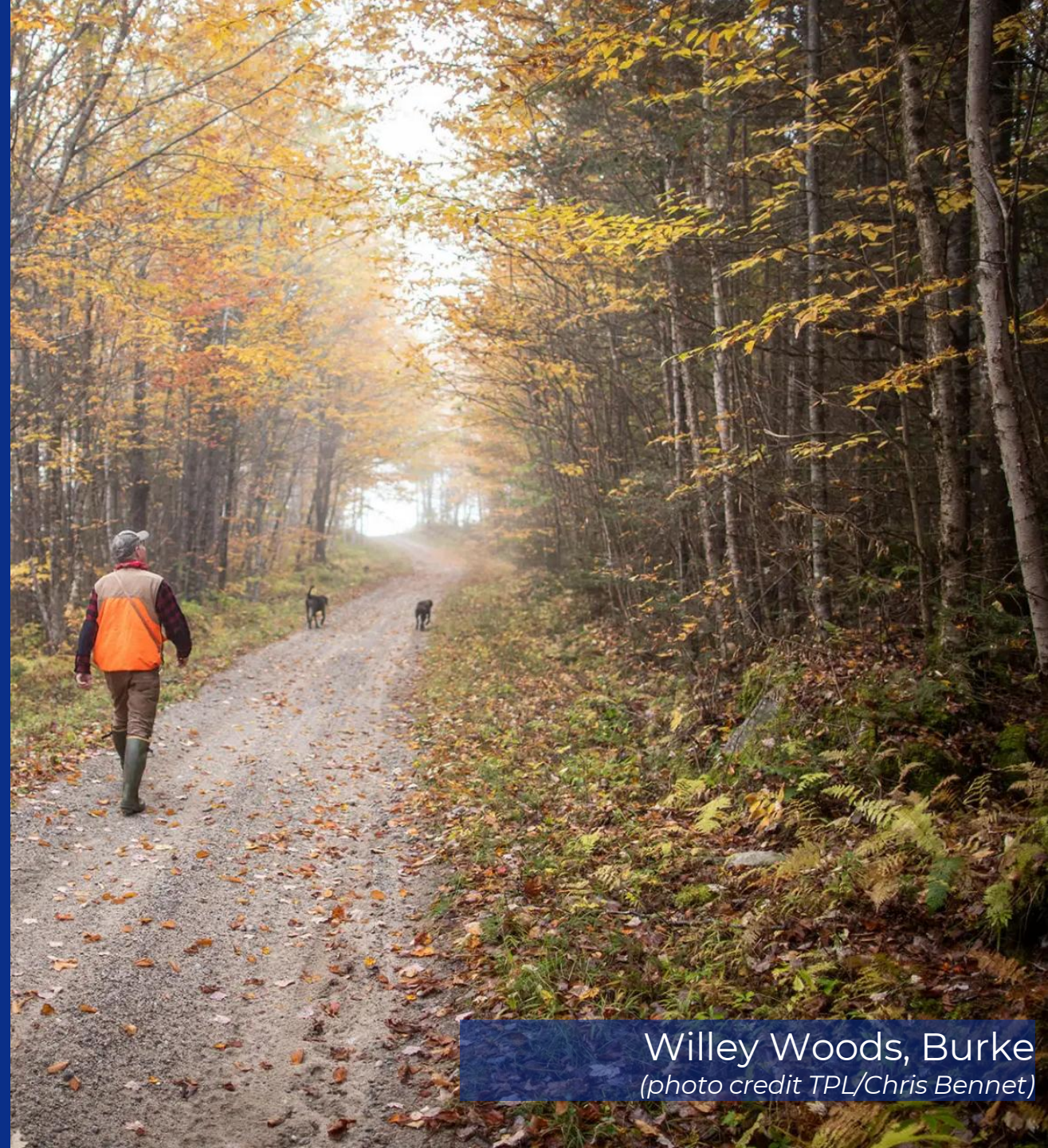
Associate Director of Resource Development
& Resiliency

Issac Bissell

Conservation Stewardship Director

Trey Martin

Director of Conservation & Rural Community
Development



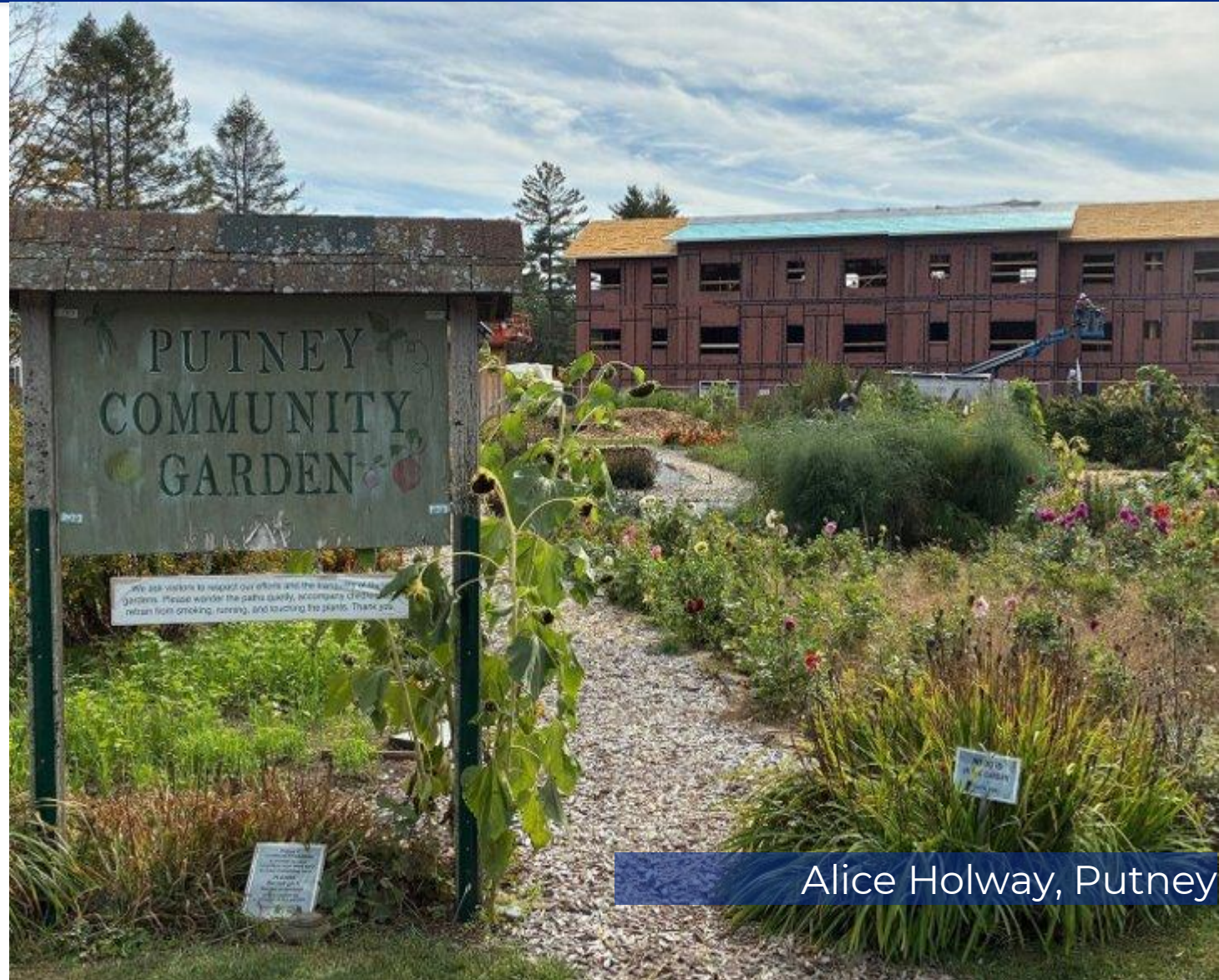
Willey Woods, Burke
(photo credit TPL/Chris Bennet)

VHCB 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



Who We Are and What We Do



VHCB invests in permanently affordable housing and in the conservation of farms, forests, natural areas, and historic sites to ensure equity, resilience, and vitality for Vermont communities.



Housing & Affordability:

Creates and preserves permanently affordable homes through grants, loans, and support for Vermont's network of housing nonprofits, ensuring homes remain affordable for generations.



Conservation & Rural Development:

Conservation of Vermont's farms, forests, and natural areas while advancing farm viability, clean water, rural economic development, and historic preservation to keep working lands productive and communities resilient.



Muddy Moose,
Morristown

Conservation and Rural Economy



VT Adaptive,
Rochester



East Calais General Store,
E. Calais



Whetstone Brook,
Brattleboro



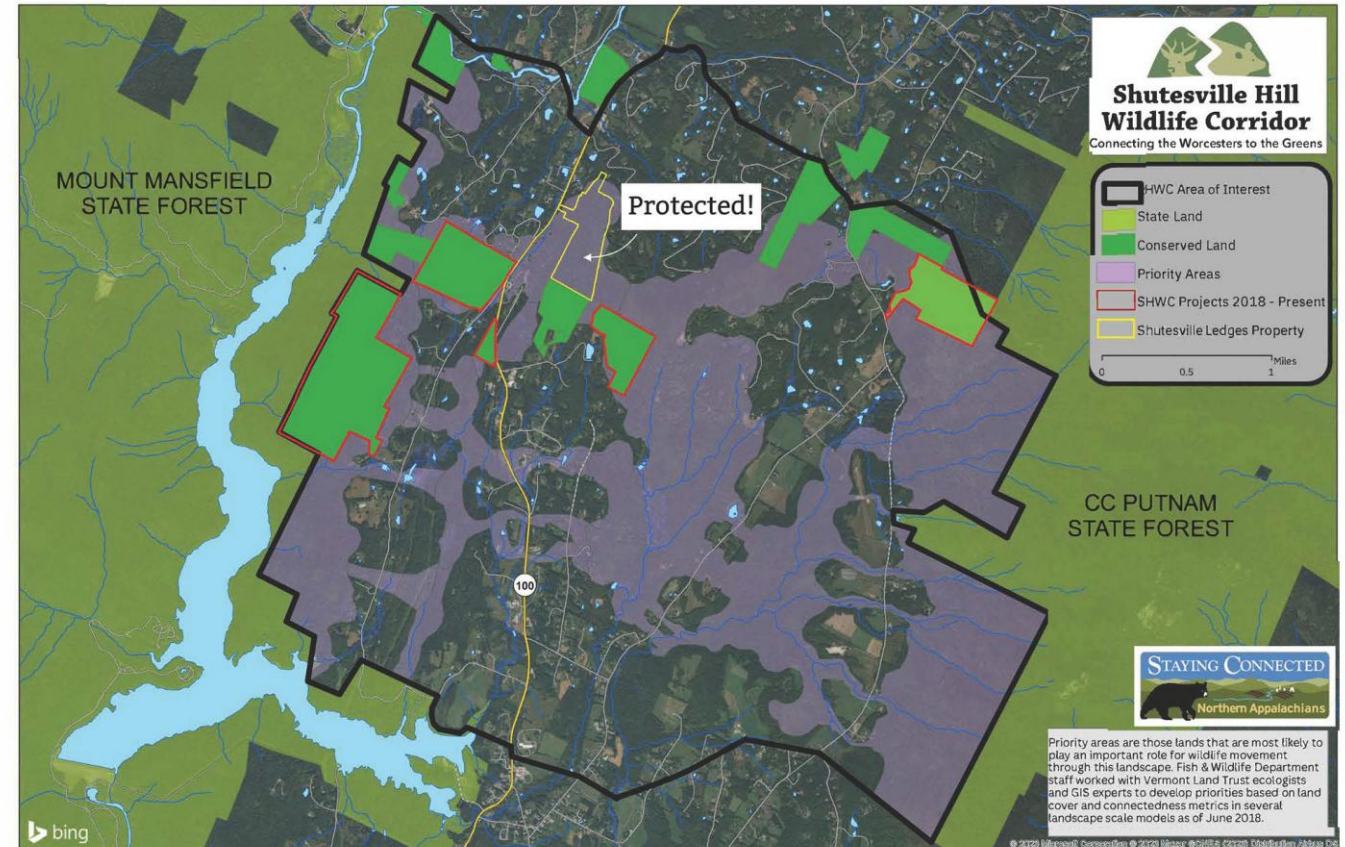
Mighty Food Farm,
Shaftsbury

Act 59: The Community Resilience and Biodiversity Protection Act



Vision: Maintain an **ecologically functional** and **connected landscape** that sustains **biodiversity** and **watershed health**, strengthens **climate resilience**, supports **working farms and forests**, provides **equitable opportunities for recreation and connection to the natural world**, and reinforces VT's **historic settlement pattern** (compact villages surrounded by rural lands/natural areas).

Goals: Conserve **30%** of Vermont by **2030** and **50%** by **2050**.

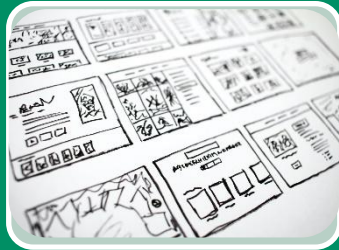


Act 59: Timeline



Phase 1. Conservation Inventory - *completed July 2024*

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



Phase 2. Conservation Plan - due June 30, 2026

A comprehensive strategy for achieving the vision and goals of the Community Resilience and Biodiversity Protection Act, including recommendations to provide and increase equitable access to conserved lands/land-based enterprises and enhancing current enhancements to working lands and rural landowners.



Phase 3. Implementation - 2026 - 2050

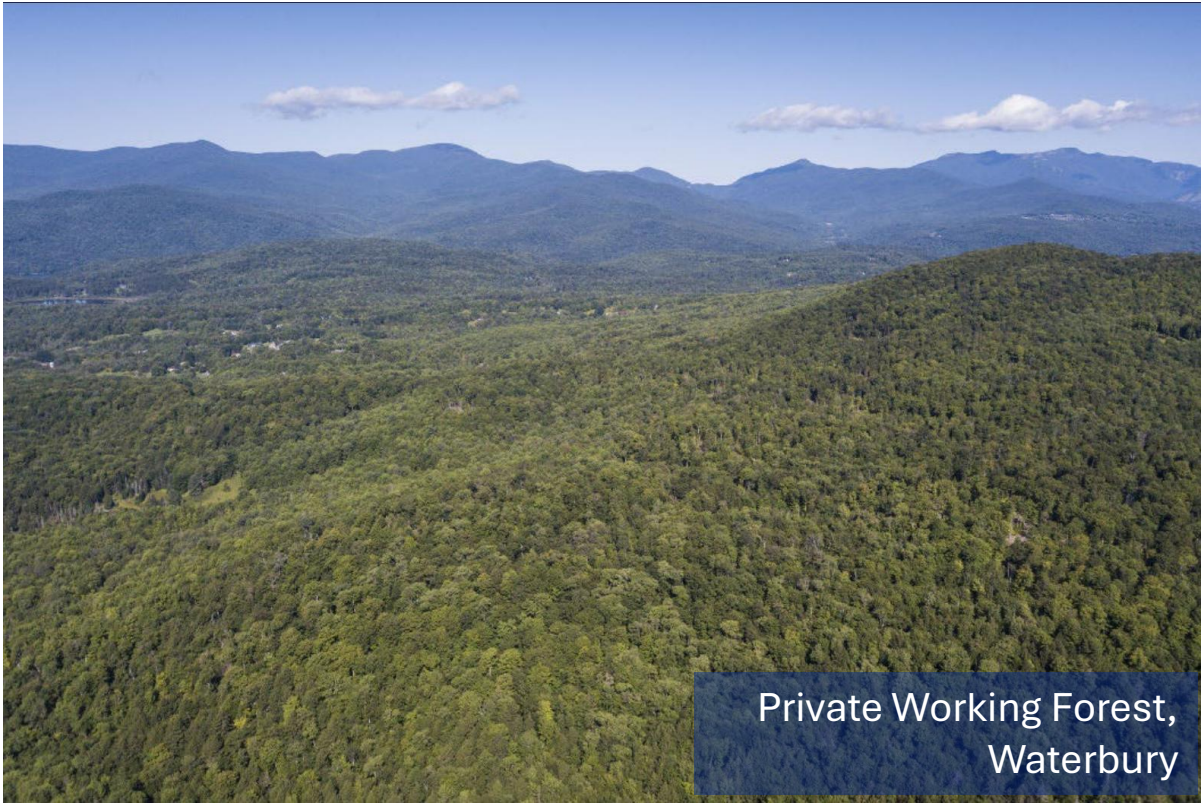
- **30% of Land Conserved by 2030**
- **50% of Land Conserved by 2050**

Act 59: Phase I Overview & Results

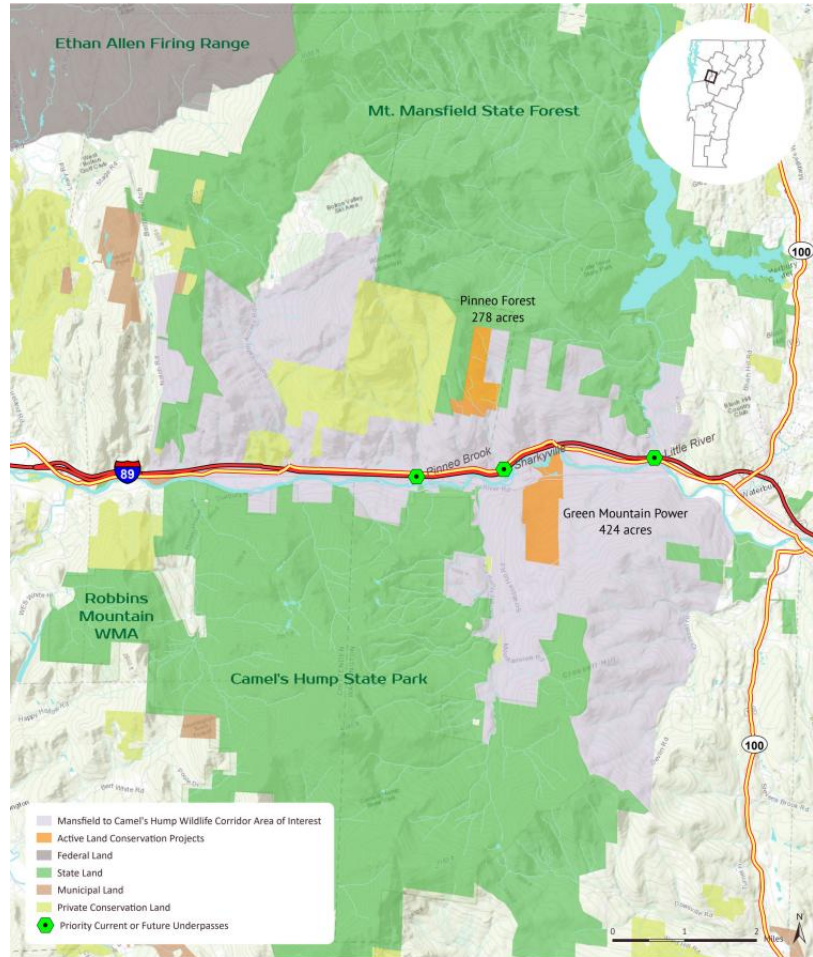


Final Inventory Results for 2024

Ecological Reserve Areas:	240,055 acres (4.08%)
Biodiversity Conservation Areas:	235,950 acres (4.01%)
Forestland and Natural Cover:	929,431 acres (15.78%)
Agricultural and Open Land:	171,347 acres (2.91%)
Total of Conserved Land:	1,576,783 acres (~27%)
Acres to Meet 2030 Goal:	189,953 acres



Act 59: Phase 2 Conservation Plan



Reconnecting the Greens: Mansfield to Camel's Hump Wildlife Corridor
Active Projects

Bolton, Waterbury & Duxbury, Vermont

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Comprehensive Strategy for Community Resilience and Biodiversity Protection Act (Due June 2026)

Building a strategy guided by **4 key criteria**:



Conserve Vermont's agricultural land, working forests, historic properties, and surface waters



Develop implementation methods for achieving vision and goals using Vermont Conservation Design as a guide



Provide and increase equitable access to protected and conserved lands and land-based enterprises



Implement the vision and goals while enhancing the State's current investments in working lands enterprises

Stakeholders: Technical Advisory Committee (TAC)



Key advisory role guiding VHCB and ANR in developing the Conservation Plan



Diverse membership representing stakeholder groups identified in Act



Provides technical input and stakeholder perspectives throughout the process



Acts as liaison between stakeholder groups and project leadership



Active from May 2025 through June 2026



Kingdom Heritage Lands,
Northeast Kingdom

Vermont Conservation Plan Framework



Three Objectives:

OBJECTIVE ONE

SUPPORT CONSERVATION IN COMMUNITIES

This objective is focused on how to better connect people and communities to the land. It aims to advance conservation in ways that benefit people and communities by protecting natural and working lands, enhancing recreation, and supporting equitable access.

OBJECTIVE TWO

CENTER VERMONT CONSERVATION DESIGN

This objective is focused on how to protect, restore and maintain an ecologically functioning and connected natural and working landscape.

OBJECTIVE THREE

STRENGTHEN CONSERVATION CAPACITY

This objective is focused on expanding the conservation community's ability to sustainably protect and steward land.



Act 59: Next Steps



Wolcott Community Forest,
Wolcott

How to Get Involved & Stay Connected

Draft Expanded Framework Report: Public draft outlining proposed objectives, pathways, and actions under Act 59 (*coming 2/2/26*)

Regional Listening Sessions: In-person (and one virtual) public meetings across the state this winter to gather regional perspectives on Act 59 priorities.

Stakeholder-Led Listening Sessions: Partner-hosted conversations to reach communities, sectors, and voices not always present in formal processes.

Stay Connected: Project updates, draft materials, and engagement opportunities available at vermontconservationplan.com

Needs and Barriers



Montpelier Flood (photo courtesy of VT Digger and Andrew Brewer)

Constraints We Must Address to Accelerate Conservation

- Climate change is accelerating conservation urgency
- Capacity and workforce constraints limit pace
- Funding and technical assistance gaps persist
- Fragmented coordination across partners and scales

Innovations & Investments



VHCB Natural Area Project Funding FY2020 – March FY2026



Year	Total Funding	Number of Projects	Acres
FY20	\$1,865,699	16	2593
FY21	\$1,195,350	9	2406
FY22	\$3,485,662	13	3198
FY23	\$3,300,769	13	2263
FY24	\$4,973,380	20	1958
FY25	\$3,540,417	18	2865
FY26 (Through March)	\$6,582,323	23	6040

Unlocking Collaboration for Conservation



Lemon Fair WMA South, Bridport
and Shoreham

Working at Multiple Scales

- **Collaboration is the fastest path to scale**
- **Cross-sector and cross-agency coordination**
- **Shared tools, data, and capacity**
- **Multiple goals, multiple partners, multiple impacts**

Implementing Vermont Conservation Design



- **Science-guided conservation priorities**
- **Landscape scale planning**
- **Public access**
- **Focus on connectivity, blocks, and adaptation**
- **Direct investment where it matters most**



Goulet Farm Dead Creek WMA Addition, Addison

Projects with Multiple Benefits



Darling Hill, Burke



Valley Brook, Morgan



Tanguay, Brunswick

Equity of Access





Thank you!

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