

Written Testimony for the House Committee on the Environment
Investing in Stewardship

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Mission: NorthWoods is a conservation and education non-profit organization; our mission is to connect people and place, through science, education and action.

Program Areas: We achieve that mission through four program areas: Conservation Science, Conservation Corps, Environmental Education and Forest Stewardship. These programs provide many pathways to spark stewardship, whether you are 5 or 105.

Location: NorthWoods is located on the Ten Mile Square Road in East Charleston VT. Until this past summer's floods, the Ten Mile Square Road was the back road that linked Island Pond to Charleston, and west to Derby and Newport.

NorthWoods manages a 1,500 acre conserved demonstration forest that spans the towns of Charleston and Morgan. This campus is a community resource - with trails open to the public year round, facilities to host community events and education programs, and a conservation barn that serves as the hub of our conservation service programs.

A glimpse at our Work: We tallied our 2024 numbers, and here are some that stand out across our programs:

118 employees, including:

16 year round positions, 31 high school students, and 8 AmeriCorps Volunteers

7,531 trees and shrubs planted in riparian zones

24 Million seeds collected from native trees and shrubs in the NEK

135 hours cleaning those seeds - part of a hydroseeding effort to restore riparian floodplains, with VT Fish and Wildlife

32 water quality projects on streams and lakeshores

7,304 student experiences

27 participating schools

6 acres of phragmites and honeysuckle control

132 inventory plots established to collect data on forest cover and bird habitat

32 miles of trail improved on 22 separate trail projects

9040 hours of work on sustainable trail projects

Our Priorities:

Access for All Initiative - After 35 years, we were proud of our work. The stone steps placed by some of our earliest crews were still in place, partnerships had grown, kids were connected to their big backyard, silver maples now grow riverside in what was a corn field a decade ago, youth hunter education classes were filled each spring, and testimonials of meaningful work experiences were ever-present, as likely to be shared by a crew member's grandmother at the gas station, as it was in seeing Alum bring the NW experience here to Montpelier and beyond. We realized that the NorthWoods Experience of today, like that of our early years, made a difference - on the environment and . It was just that not everyone had a chance to participate in that experience, and we set out to change that.

Climate Change Resilience - A silver lining of the repeat summer floods is that nearly everyone living in the NEK recognized the volatility and impact caused by severe weather events; further, suddenly, the river had a voice, a message that had once been carried only by environmentalists about protecting river corridors and wetlands went from a ripple to a roar - audible by the many impacted directly from these recent events.

Training the Next Generation of Conservation Stewards - Among our partners, NorthWoods provides the "boots on the ground" to accomplish conservation projects in forest health, water quality, wildlife habitat improvement, sustainable trails and recreational access. Key partners at the state level include FPR, FW, among others. The Serve Learn Earn workforce development program, of which NorthWoods is a subrecipient, help to ensure that even though you won't typically find NorthWoods staff lobbying here (today being an important exception) resources that are designated by the state are deployed equitably to even the most rural corner - ensuring that NorthWoods youth and pro crews are able to work on local projects in the NEK. Just as our understanding about the components of sustainable recreational trails has changed over the last two decades, so too has what is required to fully support, train, and inspire the next generation of stewards.

NorthWoods Role:

NW was founded in 1989. In 2024, we celebrated our 35th Anniversary. I joined NorthWoods first as a Youth Conservation Crew Leader for the summer of 2002, a recent college graduate. At that time, the Champion Lands Deal, and its unique conservation outcome, had just been sealed, and I worked with my crew in what had recently become the Nulhegan Basin Division of the Silvio O. Conte National Wildlife Refuge system - that spans the corridor of the entire CT River valley. Though I had grown up in West Glover, just 20 miles away as the crow flies, this work experience introduced me to the further north, further east part of the NEK - a region that's unique natural and cultural history, and import for the future, fascinates me still today.

Growing up, I'd often heard the NEK defined by deficits - lack of resources, lack of money, lack of transportation, lack of jobs, lack of opportunity. Returning here to settle down, I came to know it as a place defined by assets:

More trees, more snow, more trails, more undeveloped places, more community, endless opportunity, more to discover. I credit my work at NorthWoods, which began full time when I returned to VT 16 years ago, with this change in perspective. I see this shift now, in elementary school kids who come to NorthWoods and experience their first time cross country skiing and meeting a barred owl face to face, both in the same outing; I see it in those who come here from across the country seeking a summer job, and end up finding a home.

NorthWoods has a unique role in the conservation community. We provide the link between many state and federal initiatives to advance conservation, and the local community. In the NEK, that means we serve as a conservation resource - advocating for important conservation initiatives, convening a wide range of partners from across government and private sectors, aiming to build trust, bring visibility, and provide real connection. This direct outreach - with schools, with conservation partners, on the trails, through local projects - allows us to be part of making that connection to place. It doesn't take birthright, or ownership, though those can be part of it. At NorthWoods, we see that connection, once forged, is stewardship, and the value that brings to both human and natural communities far exceeds the cost of that investment. That's why we haven't given up, and I implore you not to give up either.

I pay property taxes, and I understand the budget constraints and hard decisions that face you all in this session. My hope is that that change in perspective - from deficit to asset - is also possible here, in this very session. Consider it a lesson that comes with NEK Territory along with being frugal, resourceful, creative and a good neighbor. Focus on the assets. Invest there.

Closing Testimonial:

Provided by Hannah Keith, 5 year Youth Crew Member and Leader from Kirby, VT

On my first day working here, my crew was at the Jay Rec Center building bridges. Except the lumber was not at the bridge site yet so I was tasked to help Josh Kelley haul in the wood that whole morning. Those of you who know Josh know that he is a big strong guy. I was a small shy 14 year old. As I struggled to balance and carry the boards he handed me some padding to put on my shoulder and said, "You hurt now but just wait for tomorrow, it's going to be much worse." In that moment I wondered if I had made a mistake but I quickly realized over the next few weeks that it was quite the opposite. I was convinced that I had found the best summer job ever. Instead of scooping ice cream or mowing lawns I was getting paid to hike and explore the NEK while doing meaningful and rewarding work that did make me more sore than I had ever been but it also made me stronger than I had ever been.

Throughout my time at NorthWoods, I have grown so much as a person while learning new skills and becoming confident in my problem solving and leadership abilities. I am very grateful to work at a place where everyone is so enthusiastic about the work we do and supportive of one another. I don't know what the future holds for me, but I am so glad to have spent the last 5 summers working at this amazing place."