

Vermont Climate Resilience & State Wildlands Act (H.276)

Sowing seeds for Vermont's future forest

"We are between two forested worlds—the natural forest of pre-[European] settlement North America and the recovered forest of the future... The earlier forested world is not dead. We are studying and struggling to preserve its living remnants. And we do not believe that the future forest is powerless to be born. These remnants—with our help—will become the seeds from which a renewed forest spreads."

— Mary Byrd Davis

"There may be a tendency to assume that lands in forest cover are resilient to the effects of flooding simply by virtue of their forested status. However, forest cover does not necessarily equate to forest health and forest flood resilience. Headwater forests of Vermont include a legacy of human modifications that have left certain land areas with a heightened propensity to generate runoff, accelerate soil erosion, and sediment streams."

— "Enhancing Flood Resiliency of Vermont State Lands"

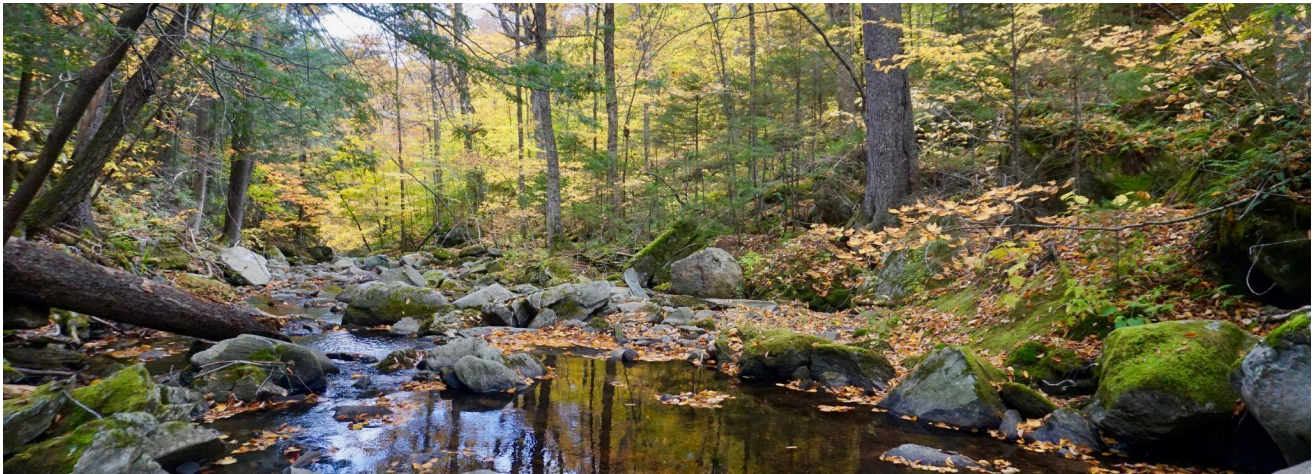


Photo: White Rock, CC Putnam State Forest

The [Vermont Climate Resilience and State Wildlands Act](#) (State Wildlands Act) is a watershed law that directs the Vermont Agency of Natural Resources to recover natural, old-growth forests on a portion of state-managed public lands. Although 76% of Vermont is forested, less than 1% of Vermont's forests are old-growth. The Vermont Fish and Wildlife Department recommends that at least 10% of Vermont forests should be managed to grow old to support Vermont's "ecologically functional landscape." The State Wildlands Act protects 268,000-acres of State Parks, State Forests, and Wildlife Management Areas, increasing the amount of land managed to recover old forests from 4% to 7% of Vermont.

Old forests are essential for Vermont's future: According to the Vermont Agency of Natural Resource's [Vermont Conservation Design](#), "Historically, the vast majority of Vermont's landscape was old forest, and it is the original habitat condition for many species. The state's native flora and fauna that have been here prior to European settlement are adapted to this landscape of old, structurally complex forest punctuated by natural disturbance gaps and occasional natural openings such as wetlands or rock outcrops. The complex physical structure of old forests creates diverse habitats, many of which are absent or much less abundant in younger forests." Old forests are more resilient to climate extremes, better protect downstream communities from floods, improve water quality by removing sediment and phosphorus from runoff, and sequester and store vast amounts of planet-warming carbon. Scientists estimate that [Vermont's forests could store two times more carbon by 2100 if allowed to grow old](#).

"The purpose of this chapter is to ensure, for the benefit of current and future generations of Vermonters, and for the entire community of life in the Green Mountain State, an enduring resource of publicly owned wildlands."



Tinker Brook Natural Area, Coolidge State Forest

A missing tool in Vermont's conservation toolbox: Vermont Conservation Design stipulates that at least 10% of Vermont should be managed to recover the old-growth forests that were once common across Vermont. [Act 59 of 2023, the Vermont Climate Resilience and Biodiversity Protection Act](#), codified these goals into law. A 2024 report by the Act 59 "State Lands Work Group," composed primarily of VT ANR staff, recommends that the legislature should "Establish [a] New Statutory Designation: Ecological Reserve." Acting on this recommendation, the Vermont Climate Resilience and State Wildlands Act creates a new statutory designation for Ecological Reserves on state lands.

What is a wildland? As defined in the Act, *wildland* "means a land management designation within the category of Ecological Reserves, of any size and current condition, permanently protected from conversion, and explicitly intended and managed to allow natural processes to prevail." This definition stems from a report that was published with the help of the Vermont Agency of Natural Resources in 2023, entitled "[Wildlands in New England](#)."

Do other states have wildlands? Yes. The best example is New York, where approximately 10% of the state's land area, nearly 3 million acres, is protected as wildlands, primarily on state lands in the Adirondack and Catskill Forest Preserves. Today, these publicly-owned lands are among the healthiest and carbon-rich forest ecosystems in the eastern US, and attract visitors from around the world.

How will this Act impact uses of state lands? The Act has no impact on recreational trails, public access roads, campgrounds, cabins, ski areas, hunting, fishing, gathering, foraging, and other established uses. Home construction is not allowed on Vermont state lands, so this Act will have no impact on housing.

Why use state lands to recover old forests? 80% of Vermont is privately owned, and the vast majority of these lands are legally available for timber harvest. Only 2% of Vermont's annual wood harvest comes from state lands. Vermont does not have a wood shortage: [on average, 50% more timber is harvested annually than is consumed in-state](#). Vermont is already committed by statute to managing 10% of the state's land area to recover old forests. The State Wildlands Act is a low-cost strategy to increase flood protection for Vermont communities, improve water quality, protect biodiversity, remove planet-warming carbon, and support our recreation economy, all while minimizing impacts to the flow of wood products.

In a survey conducted in 2020 by Vermont ANR, 85% of respondents indicated that their highest value and priority for the Worcester Range was "resource protection."