

Natural Resources Conservation Districts

Information regarding the history of NRCD funding and recent past state appropriations

Brief History of Vermont's Natural Resources Conservation Districts

- The Vermont State Natural Resources Conservation Council (NRCC) was established in 1939 under Vermont's [Soil Conservation Act](#), in response to the Dust Bowl.
- Vermont's 14 Natural Resources Conservation Districts (NRCD) are **subdivisions of state government** and operate under the authority of NRCC to assist in the implementation of conservation practices at the local level.
 - The *process* for establishing an NRCD is laid out in the Vermont Soil Conservation Act, and District boundaries were established by landowners through the petitioning process laid out statute.
- Conservation Districts exist in every U.S. State and Territory and are **often funded through county level government or state tax revenues**.
 - Unfortunately, Vermont Conservation Districts do not receive adequate funding through state or municipal appropriations, and our potential is limited by a lack of resources compared to other States.
 - In some states, NRCDs hold regulatory powers. In these states, Districts are often responsible for fighting development projects that impact natural resources (PA is an example where this occurs)

State Funding for Vermont's NRCDs

- State appropriations are dispersed to Vermont's 14 NRCDs through the NRCC line item within the Vermont Agency of Agriculture, Food & Markets' budget.
- Currently, this funding is the only source of state funding that specifically provides for the operational and organizational infrastructure required for the State NRCC and the 14 NRCDs to deliver the core services mandated by Vermont State Statute.
 - [10 V.S.A. 31 §706](#) states that NRCC shall allocate funding among the districts *"in such amounts as shall be fair, reasonable, and in the public interest"* with due consideration given to *"the greater relative expense of carrying on operations, the volume of work to be done, and the special importance of instituting conservation operations immediately."*
- Prior to our recent engagement in the legislative process, NRCC's base budget was level funded at \$112,000 for decades. This **systemic and consistent underfunding of Vermont's NRCDs** led to our current budgetary situation of each District writing and managing many different grants just to sustain operations and programming.
 - This funding model has been unsustainable and led to high staff turnover and burnout, reducing our capacity to meet our statutory obligations and expand conservation programming and implementation.

As the **demand for our services continues to grow as a direct result of state policy and goals**, Vermont's NRCDs are trying to climb out of our hole of chronic underfunding so we can best position ourselves to do the work we were established to do on behalf of our constituents.

- **Conservation Districts are the boots on the ground.** We are foundational to the state's agricultural and conservation communities, and the specific niche we fill is **direct technical assistance on lands**.
- We are often working "behind the scenes", but our technical assistance gets conservation and natural resources projects done on public and private lands across our state.

FY26 Budget Request

Sec. B.225.2 of the Governor's recommended FY26 Budget includes a base appropriation of \$500,000 in state general funds to NRCC. **This is a \$112,000 cut that we cannot afford.** While we acknowledge that the increase from \$500,000 to \$3,000,000 is significant, it represents real need and the backfilling of decades of chronic underfunding.

- Everyone has a place that they love in Vermont, and your favorite place has likely benefited from the work of the conservation districts.
- We are on the ground, collecting soil and water samples, writing Nutrient Management Plans for farmers, helping landowners and working landscapes navigate different grant programs and implement conservation practices on their land, etc.

Leveraging Federal Dollars: A \$3,000,000 base budget for NRCC will have an even greater impact, as **every District uses state funding to match additional federal and private grant funding**, allowing state dollars to stretch further.

- Conservation Districts receive roughly half of our funding from the state and half from federal grants, but we are often limited in our ability to draw down federal funding due to a lack of matching state funds.

The \$3,000,000 request would not replace the majority of grants Districts currently receive to implement projects on the ground. This funding would allow Conservation Districts and the NRCC to retain and recruit skilled staff, engage with their communities in a more meaningful way, and generally build back up capacity after decades of chronic underfunding.

- A \$3,000,000 base appropriation will allow us to work more efficiently and expand our work, while still relying on all the grants we currently receive to implement programs on the ground.

Recent Past Appropriations - How increased funding has been spent to date

In recent years, we have increased our base from \$112,000 to \$612,000. This modest increase has already created enormous difference for the people we serve.

- This base increase has already brought on an additional **10.5 FTEs** across all Districts (due to match), including conservation and agricultural specialists. This means that more work is getting done out in our communities.

Here are some testimonials from Districts about what the additional funding to date has meant for them:

*"The increased appropriation, paired with additional grant funding, also allowed us to hire an agricultural specialist to assist farms in our district. **This new employee also manages our conservation tree and shrub nursery, which fills a badly needed gap in tree availability in Vermont.***

*We also used our appropriation to apply to a number of state, federal, and private grants for projects. This includes a \$1.5 million dollar project to **improve stream crossing structures** in the county; \$300,000 to hire a new staff member that would train local contractors and road crews to **control invasive species** in our area for several years; and a number of other grants to do specific projects to improve **flood resilience, water quality, and wildlife habitat** in our county."*

- Essex NRCD District Manager

*"I can not stress how important these funds were in terms of helping us have the confidence we needed to hire much needed new staff. One new staff member is an assistant at our **native plant nursery**, who helps with the tree sale, tree plantings, tree propagation, and other general nursery and tree planting tasks. This same staff person also assists with **water quality** data management, report writing, and general grant assistance in the winter months. The other new staff will include **community outreach and education** and will make annual visits to select boards, planning commissions, and conservation commissions to update them about new programs and opportunities for project implementation and to provide them with **technical support**, as needed." - Poultney Mettowee NRCD District Manager*

*"Our new staff position has greatly increased the district's capacity to develop and pursue **restoration projects** (trees for streams, floodplain restoration, stormwater projects, etc) and has also made it possible for us to take on a greater role in **public outreach**. With our increased state funding, we have brought in more than \$18,000 in additional grant funding, allowing us to expand our leadership role in local conservation efforts and develop new partnerships that include the Vermont River Conservancy, and the Brattleboro and Marlboro Conservation Commissions." - Windham NRCD District Manager*

*"Our new equipment has helped us **enhance riparian buffers** in our District, which are critical to increasing flood resilience, maintaining water quality, and benefiting wildlife. The water pump we purchased will allow for staff to adequately water the bare root trees we plant, increasing the likelihood of survival." -Winooski NRCD District Manager*

*"In the past we were not able to consider hiring a full-time Conservation District Manager for our District, but the increase in funding has made this possible. The full-time manager will allow the district to develop more projects to **preserve and protect the water quality** in the district. In addition, we will be able to provide more assistance and outreach to landowners and support our educational efforts." - Ottauquechee NRCD District Manager*

*"Increased state funding has allowed our District Manager and other staff to better **respond to partners and landowners' requests for assistance** that do not easily fall under our current grants." - Orleans NRCD District Manager*