

House Committee on Environment

March 18, 2025



Vermont
Housing &
Conservation
Board

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Executive Director

Trey Martin
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Water Street River Park, Northfield



Floodplain restoration: Whetstone Brook, Brattleboro

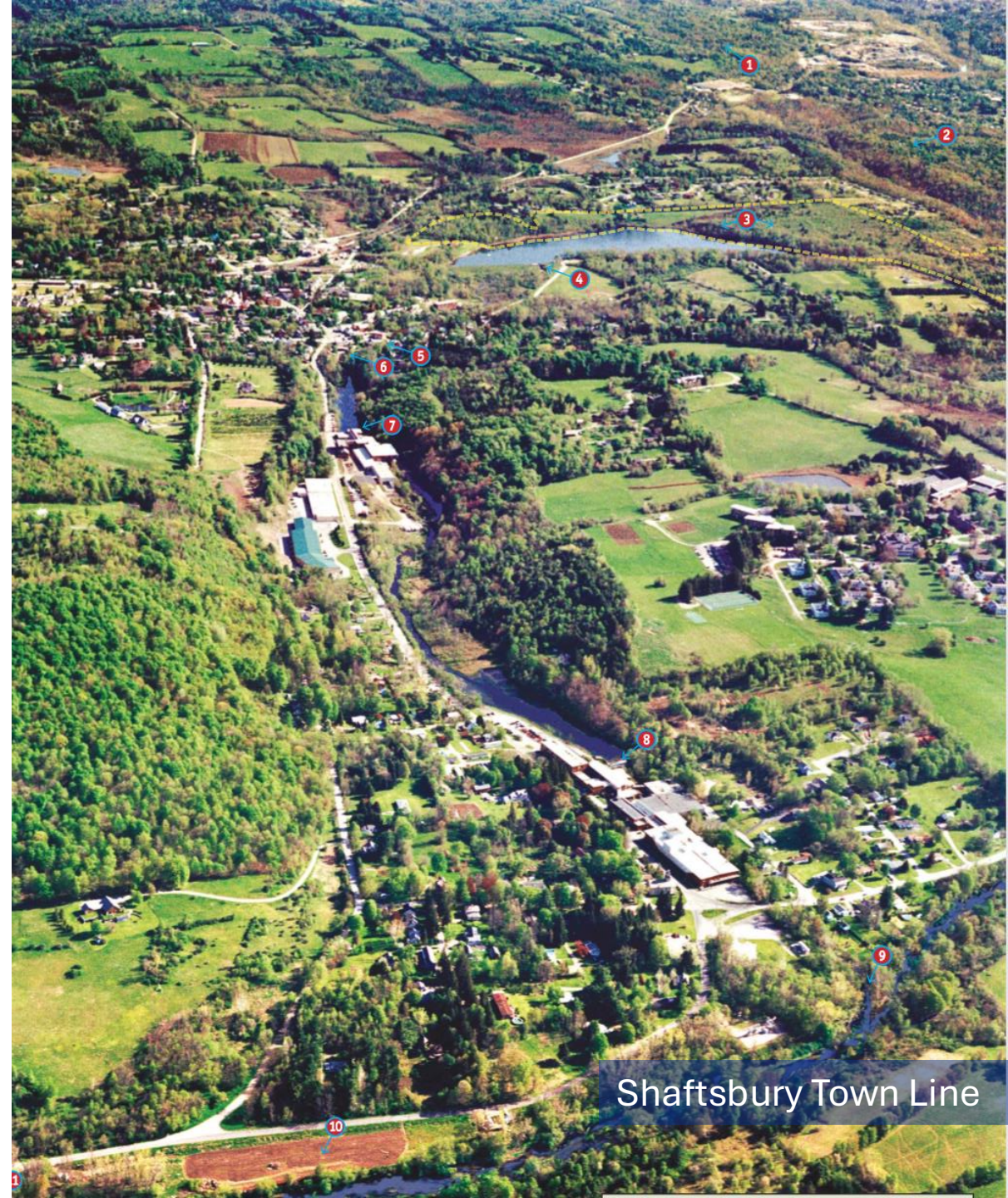


Vermont
Housing &
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Board

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



Shaftsbury Town Line



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A Conservation Vision for Vermont

Act 59 of 2023, The Community Resilience and Biodiversity Protection Act, set forth a vision to maintain an ecologically functional landscape that:

- Sustains biodiversity
- Maintains landscape connectivity
- Supports watershed health
- Promotes climate resilience
- Supports working farms and forests
- Provides opportunities for recreation
- Supports historic settlement patterns
- Conserves 30% of the State's total land area by 2030 and 50% by 2050



Mount Ascutney: Brownsville Village
Weathersfield, Vermont

A Broad and Inclusive Approach to Conservation for Vermont



Kingdom Heritage Lands

Act 59 calls for a conservation plan that protects, restores and enhances an ecologically functional and connected, natural and working landscape

This means increased focus on highest priority natural communities and old forests

The Act also directs us to sustain natural resource production

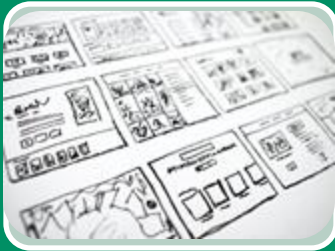
And it prioritizes broad access to historic sites, recreation areas and the waters of Vermont

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 December 2025

A comprehensive strategy for achieving the vision and goals of the Community Resilience and Biodiversity Protection Act



Phase 3. Implementation. 2026 - 2050

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



Key Components of Act 59

- **Goal:** Conserve 30% of Vermont's land by 2030 and 50% by 2050. Conservation will include a mix of ecological reserve areas, biodiversity conservation areas, and natural resource management areas.
- **Key Definitions:**
 - **Ecological Reserve Areas:** Areas with permanent protection from conversion, managed to maintain a natural state with minimal human interference.
 - **Biodiversity Conservation Areas:** Areas with permanent protection from conversion where the primary goal is sustaining species or habitats and may include active management interventions.
 - **Natural Resource Management Areas:** Areas with permanent protection from conversion but subject to long-term, sustainable land management to support ecological function while allowing for resource use.
 - **Sustainable Land Management:** Stewardship of forests, wetlands, riparian areas, and agricultural lands in a way that maintains or restores biodiversity, productivity, and ecosystem function but does not guarantee permanent protection.



Act 59 Phase I: Inventory Questions

1. How should the **three conservation categories be refined** to complete the land inventory and conservation plan? What criteria should determine **which agricultural lands qualify for biodiversity conservation**?
2. What is the **total amount of conserved land in Vermont** within each of the three conservation categories, including public and private lands? How should other permanently protected lands be accounted for in this inventory?
3. What are the various **conservation practices that contribute to conservation goals**? How do they function, what impact do they have, and what metrics are available to measure their effectiveness?
4. How can **state-owned lands** be used to expand conserved ecological reserve areas?
5. What **implementation methods** can be used to achieve the conservation goals outlined in this chapter, using **Vermont Conservation Design** as a guide?



Act 59 Phase I: Inventory Questions

6. How effective are current conservation efforts in **protecting Vermont's aquatic systems**, and how should strategies be improved?
7. How can **existing programs be utilized to meet conservation goals**, and **what new programs**, if any, should be developed to support these efforts?
8. What **existing funding sources** support conservation efforts, including land acquisition, conservation easements, staffing, and long-term stewardship? **What additional funding sources** may be needed to fully achieve conservation goals?
9. **How equitable** are current land protection and conservation strategies? What improvements could be made to ensure fair access and distribution of conservation benefits?
10. What opportunities exist in **intergenerational land transfer trends to support conservation**? How can the state proactively direct resources to facilitate conservation at the time of land transfers?

Who Contributed?

Lead Organizations:



Partner Organizations:

- Vermont Land Trust
- The Nature Conservancy of Vermont
- Trust for Public Land
- Audubon Vermont
- State Natural Resources Conservation Council
- Vermont Association of Conservation Districts

Act 59 on the VHCB website



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Help Decide Vermont's Pathways to Conservation!

Why? Stakeholders across Vermont celebrated the passage of the Community Resilience and Biodiversity Protection Act in June of 2023. This legislation puts Vermont on course to protect the ecological functions of our landscapes with the ambitious goals of conserving 30% of Vermont's landscape by 2030 and 50% by 2050. [Read a summary of the act here.](#) The Vermont Legislature has directed the Vermont Agency of Natural Resources and the Vermont Housing and Conservation Board to collect public input as they inventory the current state of conservation in Vermont and develop a long-term plan to reach these ambitious goals. **We want to hear from you to design equitable and effective pathways to conserve and protect Vermont's lands and waters.**

What? We are collecting feedback from various stakeholders on several key questions to complete an inventory of current and possible conservation in Vermont:

- **What are our values in creating the Conservation Plan?** What is important to you to have in the 30x30 and 50x50 Conservation Plan?
- **What kinds of land counts towards the goals?** What kind of conservation practices or land protection counts towards the goals in the Act?
- **How are we getting there?** What are the practices, programs, methods we are currently using

vhcb.org/act-59



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Question 1: Conservation Categories

Recommendations from VHCB & ANR:

- No changes to statutory definitions of conservation categories
- Broad inclusion of all conserved working lands and natural areas
- Conserved farmland managed for annual crops, grazing, and haying included within Natural Resource Management Areas

Next Steps (Phase II):

- Explore feasibility of a new category for Agricultural Open Lands (AOL)
- Define goals, guidelines, and data collection methods for AOL lands in alignment with 2030 & 2050 conservation targets



Wolcott Community Forest



Question 2: Land Inventory & Data

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

Recommendations from VHCB & ANR for Phase II:

- Invest in ANR & VCGI to improve data collection, management, and governance
- Address gaps in data completeness, storage, and quality to ensure Act 59 compliance
- Strengthen data systems & tracking for more accurate conservation planning

Question 3 & 7: Conservation Practices & Conservation Programs

Recommendations from VHCB & ANR for Phase II Focus:

- Targeted investments across all conservation categories and biophysical regions
- Processes to designate Ecological Reserve Areas (ERAs) on State lands
- Enhancing working lands for biodiversity, ecological health & community resilience
- Strengthening protections for water resources & flood resilience
- Expanding participation & benefits across communities



The Goat Project, Bennington

Question 4: State Lands & Ecological Reserve Areas

Recommendations from VHCB and ANR for Phase II Focus:

- Expand tools to designate Ecological Reserve Areas (ERAs) on State lands
- Establish a new statutory definition for Ecological Reserves with updated management sub-classes
- Use landscape-scale conservation planning to guide ERA designations
- Collaborate with public & private partners to pilot alternative easement models for State fee land acquisitions
- Explore opportunities to expand the Forest Legacy Program to support ERA conservation



Question 5: Implementation Methods, VCD & Future Process

Recommendations from VHCB and ANR for Phase II Focus:

- Conduct spatial analysis to assess how conserved lands align with Act 59 categories
- Perform a gap analysis to identify unprotected priority areas
- Develop strategies to enhance & promote conservation elements on existing conserved lands
- Expand budgets & programs to meet the broader conservation focus mandated by Act 59



Island Pond Island, Brighton

Question 6: Aquatic Systems

Recommendations from VHCB and ANR for Phase II:

- Include an evaluation of how to enhance protections for aquatic systems on both existing & newly conserved lands
- Integrate watershed-scale & network-based conservation approaches to support terrestrial & aquatic ecosystems
- Develop new landowner incentives, including short-term management designations and tax programs (e.g., UVA) to encourage conservation actions



Maidstone Bends, Brunswick

Question 8: Funding & Capacity

Recommendations from VHCB and ANR for Phase II:

- Develop long-term funding strategies to strengthen conservation capacity and then increase investments
- Leverage State & Federal funds by securing matching resources
- Engage foundations & philanthropists to create a collaborative funding model
- Explore market-based financing tools that support landowners effectively, ethically & equitably
- Align conservation efforts with existing laws & programs (e.g., Act 250, UVA)



Valley Brook, Morgan

Question 9: Equity

VHCB and ANR Recommendations for Phase II:

- Support LAOB, the EJ Advisory Council, and rural community representatives through capacity investments
- Increase inclusion of landowners & underrepresented voices in conservation decision-making
- Track progress toward more inclusive processes and equitable outcomes with defined metrics & benchmarks
- Provide resources & support to incorporate Indigenous perspectives in conservation efforts
- Facilitate community-owned & cooperatively managed lands to support rural enterprises and alternative conservation models



Camp DREAM, Fletcher

Question 10: Intergenerational Land Transfer

VHCB & ANR Recommendations for Phase II:

- Invest in organizations already assisting with landowner succession planning
- Expand outreach to Vermont landowners about available conservation programs and tools
- Assess needs to improve intergenerational land transfer and conservation efforts
- Implement funding opportunities to support long-term stewardship planning for conservation outcomes



The Farm Upstream, Jericho

Conservation Plan Requirements:

- Protect Vermont's farmland, forests, historic sites, recreation areas, and waterways while achieving Act 59's goals
- Use Vermont Conservation Design to guide conservation efforts
- Expand public access to conserved lands and land-based enterprises
- Enhance existing investments and support for working lands, rural landowners, and VHCB's conservation mission



THANK YOU

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