



Vermont Association of Conservation Districts

Our Land. Our Water. Our Future.

Vermont's 14 Natural Resources Conservation Districts (NRCs) respectfully submit this memo to help clarify information you heard regarding the Natural Resources Conservation Council's (NRCC) base budget within the Agency of Agriculture Food and Markets (VAAF). The Governor's proposed budget for fiscal year 2025 recommends cutting the NRCC base budget by \$112,000 for a total base appropriation of \$500,000. **Vermont's Conservation Districts cannot afford to lose our already insufficient base funds to carry out our statutory obligations of protecting natural resources in the state of Vermont.**

Furthermore, you heard in testimony that VAAF distributes over \$7,000,000 to conservation districts. This number includes our current base appropriation of \$612,000, but the remainder comes in the form of competitive grants that each NRC spends significant time applying for and reporting on. As competitive grant funding, these funds do not meet our serious need for base funds to support NRC operations. **NRCs are part of state government, but we do not receive adequate base funding to support the operational costs and administrative needs to implement the specific projects our grant funding is for in the most efficient and effective manner.**

Collectively, the Vermont Association of Conservation Districts (VACD), State Natural Resources Conservation Council (NRCC), and Vermont's 14 Natural Resources Conservation Districts (NRCs) have been awarded \$7,180,370 under active agreements with the Vermont Agency of Agriculture, Food, and Markets. These grants **cover multiple fiscal years** and support a variety of agricultural programming and natural resources priorities. **For FY25, the budgeted amount for these program areas is \$2,120,004 across 16 entities.**

It is important to distinguish competitive grant funding from our base budget which supports ongoing operations. Much of the VAAF funding NRCs currently receive comes from the Clean Water Fund in the form of competitive grants for specific projects and programs. In FY25, Vermont's 14 Natural Resources Conservation Districts anticipate:

- **\$1,938,291** in competitive grants through the Agricultural Clean Water Initiative Program (AgCWIP), which supports our work helping agricultural producers make clean water improvements.
- **\$181,713** in competitive grants under the Pay for Performance program, which enables VACD and NRC staff to assist VAAF in carrying out data collection and data processing necessary to run that program on behalf of the state.

Individual NRC budgets are composed almost entirely of competitive grant funding, which is a significant challenge. It takes enormous amounts of administrative time and effort to identify, apply for, manage, and report on grant funding. This is time that our experienced and professional District Managers and staff could be spending in the field, helping landowners and farmers navigate relevant state resources and implement conservation best practices. NRCs provide technical assistance to landowners, municipalities, businesses and more, and their ability to complete this work is strained by the sheer administrative burden required by competitive funding sources.

The high dollar amount the Agency is reporting is actually the result of each NRC needing to piecemeal together increasing numbers of competitive grants to backfill the funding gaps they experience in their budgets to cover administrative capacity. It is the result of NRCs being chronically underfunded for decades yet persisting in order to help the state carry out important goals related to our state's natural resources. Assuming that NRCs can continue to exist on budgets piecemealed together from dozens of different competitive grants is not accurate or sustainable.

- Funding from Special Funds, such as the Clean Water Fund, for a specified purpose does not help us escape the time-consuming application, reporting, and deliverables requirements of grant funding, and it **does not cover the full scope of our operations.**

- **Conservation Districts currently have the capacity to spend a \$3,000,000 base budget.** Our highest need is to fund one FTE for each District, so we can ensure there is **consistency in the level of services across the state.** Some Districts cannot currently afford to have a full-time District Manager. Districts that do have full-time District Managers are able to secure greater competitive grant funding.

- Conservation Districts are different from nonprofit community partners who provide similar services because Conservation Districts are **subdivisions of state government.**
 - ◆ Conservation Districts were established by Vermont’s [Soil Conservation Act](#) as part of a national response to the Dust Bowl in the 1930s. We operate under the authority of the Vermont Natural Resources Conservation Council (NRCC) which is a designated “agency of the state” under 10 V.S.A. § 703.
 - ◆ Each District has a Board of Supervisors who are designed to be local residents elected by the public to that position.
 - ◆ In addition to the general administrative burdens of operating **county-scale government entities** in compliance with state and federal law, districts have a statutory obligation to be a resource for natural resources conservation for their constituents, which include every landowner and land manager in every part of the state.
 - ◆ As subdivisions of state government, conservation districts have been chronically underfunded for decades, straining our ability to meet these statutory obligations and limiting our ability to fully fulfill our purpose as a general purpose conservation delivery system for the State of Vermont.

We want to end by clarifying that the Agency of Agriculture Food and Markets is one of our strongest partners, and the funds granted to Districts through VAAFMM programs are *absolutely crucial* to our agricultural clean water work. We are grateful to VAAFMM for their continued support in the form of grant awards. Competitive grants have been a lifeline to NRCDs over the years, and we will continue to use state grant funding to leverage federal funds as we have always done, but these grants do not mitigate the need for base operational funding.

Our \$3,000,000 base budget request would not replace our competitive grant funding, but rather, will allow us to implement these grants with greater efficiency as a result of more stable administrative capacity across the state.

Signed,



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Tree planting program with Winooski Natural Resources Conservation District.



Water sampling conducted by Poultney Mettowee Natural Resources Conservation District.