

To: Senate Agriculture Committee

From: Michelle Monroe, Executive Director, Vermont Association of Conservation Districts

January 21, 2026 Testimony

Overview

- The Vermont legislature created Vermont's 14 conservation districts in 1939 as county-scale units of local government. Every state created districts as part of the national response to the Dustbowl to be local partners for the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), which is part of USDA.
- Districts provide non-regulatory assistance to farms and help farms ensure they are in compliance with the Required Agricultural Practices.
- We also assist farms with applications for financial assistance, grants, and disaster assistance. Districts typically coordinate the work of multiple service providers who are assisting a farm.

2025 Accomplishments

- **In 2025, districts directly assisted 452 farms** and provided training at 222 outreach and education events attended by 3,239 farmers and community members.
- Planted 12,087 stems on farms as part of buffers that reduce non-point source pollution and can assist with flood mitigation.
- Districts offer soil, manure, and water quality sampling on farms, often for free. Last year, districts collected 1,046 samples.
- District staff visited farms 767 times and assessed 15,037 acres for land treatment planning or water quality concerns.
- One of the unique aspects of Conservation Districts is their ability to partner closely with USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) which provides funding to help farms mitigate the impacts of flooding and drought, reduce non-point source pollution into waterways, and improve farm viability.
- As NRCS has experienced significant staffing losses over the past year, districts have been able to help fill those gaps.
- One part of the work districts do with NRCS is convene local community members to provide input into NRCS processes and priorities. In recent years, this has expanded to allow districts to apply for Local Fund Pools that are focused on local priorities, including flood mitigation. In the current grant round, \$4.4M has been set aside across Vermont to address those locally identified priorities. Districts use the funding they receive from the state budget to pay staff to do this work.
- Districts also do non-NRCS work with municipalities and other landowners including upgrading culverts, removing dams, protecting wildlife and fish habitat, and conserving natural resources.

District Funding Ask

- Districts are asking for \$948,200 in direct state funding this year, which is what we received last year plus an adjustment to account for increased healthcare and other staffing costs.
- For every \$1 districts receive in base funds, they leverage \$9 in additional funds.
- This is the most flexible funding districts receive. They use it to support a wide variety of work that grants aren't available for, such as being able to meet with a district resident who requests assistance.
- The state allocation is also frequently used as match for federal or state grants, or to pilot a program districts will then use other funds to expand.
- To give you an idea of the breadth of how these funds are used, last year the Orleans District used these funds to provide septic system inspections and maintenance assistance to residents in the Lake Parker watershed; install check dams on 1,000 feet of ditch on a farm where water quality monitoring had revealed an erosion problem; partially fund the purchase of a rock picker to assist farmers with crop rotation; and provide free willow stakes to residents to address erosion.
- Nearly every position in a district is jointly funded with state and federal grant funds, but both of those sources are at risk.
- The state funds come primarily from the Clean Water Fund. This year, we testified to the Clean Water Board about the critical importance of funding for VAAFMs programs that support partners, such as their AgCWIP grant. We are concerned about possible future reductions to the Clean Water fund, and it is a priority for us to maintain the base of funding that allows Districts to provide basic services and leverage federal dollars.
- The federal funds come through NRCS and sometimes through agencies such as U.S. Fish and Wildlife for specific projects.
- It is unclear what the future will hold for federal grants and technical assistance agreements with partners. Even once funding agreements are secured, delays in payments have been causing significant financial hardship for districts already. We don't anticipate this will improve.
- Reliable state funding can provide a cushion for districts, ensuring a minimum level of financial stability.