

Thank you for having me.

I know you heard from conversation districts earlier in the session so I will skip the overview of what we do and dive into the federal freeze impacts.

We're seeing \$4.75 million in impacts across the conservation district system. The primary impact is to technical assistance, but it's also created uncertainty for a \$1.2 million project to replace three culverts in Lunenburg, Brighton and Ferdinand, and a fourth \$40,000 culvert project on the Upper Missisquoi River in Orleans County.

One project, which was training a cohort of Americorps volunteers as conservation planners in Vermont and the U.S. Virgin Islands has been cancelled outright, leaving the White River Conservation District with \$200,000 in unreimbursed expenses.

USDA has frozen funding that pays for technical assistance to farmers. Most of this funding is aimed at helping farmers apply for projects with the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS). It includes conservation planners to assist farmers in determining what is needed on their farm, help them develop a plan and then assist them in applying to NRCS. Both VACD and several districts have funding for this work.

In addition, VACD has funding for NRCS program assistants who take the applications and turn them into contracts and a GIS/UAV team of three people who are essential tech support for NRCS in Vermont. This team has developed tools staff can use on their phones to enter data while they're at the farm standing in the field and then translate this data into reports and maps. They've saved NRCS hours of work. All three members of this team are also drone pilots. They plan and execute flights to gather data that can be hard to obtain otherwise, turning that flight data into detailed maps farmers and NRCS staff can use to plan practices for the farm.

VACD also employs a wetlands specialist who works with NRCS with the frozen funds. Overall, 14 FTEs operating in every corner of the state, have had their funding frozen. VACD and the districts are continuing to employ these staff, at considerable financial risk. The federal government currently owes VACD more than half a million dollars for work already completed by our technical services staff.

As you all know, farmers have made the largest contribution of any sector to reducing nutrient run-off in both the Champlain and Memphremagog basins. These freezes, along

with the chaos the firings and planned firings have created at NRCS itself, are endangering that work.

The districts are also doing work that has flood mitigation impacts, such as upgrading culverts and restoring floodplains, that is being put at risk. The work on farms, installing buffers, protecting wetlands, helping farmers build healthier soils that can absorb more water and resist drought, is also essential to mitigating against the two biggest weather threats Vermont faces – flood and drought.

Earlier in the session, staff and board members from the districts testified about an increase in funding for the conservation districts. I wanted to update you on where that funding request stands. The House Appropriations Committee restored base funding for FY26 to the districts to the FY25 amount of \$612,000, reversing a proposed cut from the administration. The House Agriculture Committee supported the districts' initial ask of \$3 million and House Environment recommended \$1.25 million.

District work is driven by local communities. The districts are governed by an elected board and each year they undertake a process to solicit input from the public about what the priority conservation needs are in that district.

Unfortunately, available grant funding doesn't always align with what local residents have identified as priorities for their communities. In Bennington County, for example, residents have identified PFAs, food insecurity, and farm viability as top concerns. With funding for a part-time person the district manager could create a full-time agricultural assistance staff person by combining the additional base funding with existing ag grants. Then the district manager would have more time to focus on the areas county residents have identified as priorities. Right now that work gets squeezed in around work on the grants that are the primary source of funding for the district.

Increasing the base funding would make it possible for districts to better serve their communities, which is why we are asking for funding for a part-time person for each district.