



2/19/25 Testimony

Senate Economic Development, Housing and General Affairs
Kelly Ault, Executive Director, VOBA

I'm Kelly Ault, Executive Director of the Vermont Outdoor Business Alliance. Thank you, Chair Clarkson and members of the committee, for inviting me back to speak about Vermont's \$2.1 billion outdoor economy that is driving both economic and social impact in all our urban and rural communities.

We appreciate the opportunity to share the work that our state-wide, non-profit organization is doing to spur business and workforce development within this highly diversified sector which is largely composed of small businesses in manufacturing, retail, outdoor centers, trail building, lodging, media, guiding and many more that provide products and services to Vermonters and visitors.

VOBA's core work fosters entrepreneurship, career pathways, and branding for the success of Vermont's employers and employees. This in turn enables their contributions to vibrant downtowns and villages, quality natural and recreation resources, and equitable access for all in work places and outdoor spaces.

VOBA's organizing of 200 businesses in Move Forward Together Vermont planning process administered by the Vermont Outdoor Recreation Economic Collaborative (or VOREC) last year shaped a five year state economic agenda with many partners centered in climate resiliency, equity, innovation and sustainability and career pathways.

This process which built upon outcomes from VOBA's grant-funded business and workforce programs over the last 18 months which

demonstrated the potential for significant economic and social gains with a State investment of \$500,000 in FY26:

- \$250,000 would support VOBA's Climate and Circularity Outdoor Business Program which provides *sustainability and innovation technical assistance* for business planning and adaptations leading to stability in the face of climate change, the shift to a circular economy, and increased responsiveness to consumer behavior and outdoor visitation trends.
- \$250,000 would support VOBA's Climate and Trades Outdoor Workforce Program which provides *employer - led, professional development training in sustainability and technical occupations* tailored for career advancement of current Vermont employees and for attracting new and diverse employees to the state and the sector.

I'll dive down into each of these programs tied to VOBA's policy agenda which identified needs in flood recovery funding as well as entrepreneur and innovation investment.

VOBA's investment ask stemmed from program learning in FY24/ FY25:

- Our entrepreneur support delivered technical assistance to 40 start up and early stage outdoor gear, apparel and accessory manufacturers located in Vermont outdoor communities.
- We expanded the service provider network to 30 business advisors, trade and marketing consultants, financial planners, lenders with outdoor expertise.

Key activities included:

- Small group workshops and 1:1 consultations in areas of strategy, finances and pitch development of which companies competed in the first annual outdoor pitchfest.
- Organizing participation at regional trades shows and the annual

Vermont gear makers festival provided new market access, expanding customers and strengthening the storytelling of the Vermont brand rooted in people and place.

Circling back to the FY26 funding ask, \$250,000 would enable the expansion of our 1:1 and group technical assistance to serve 80 Vermont small companies in commercial clusters near recreation opportunities.

- Assistance would provide business and financial strategy, climate adaptation and shifts to the circular economy, market access and product development, new technology, and efficient operations.
- Outcomes would include companies demonstrating an ROI from climate resiliency measures, sustainable, local, and recycled production, facility & factory technology upgrades, and stewardship education services.

The other key area of VOBA's policy agenda identified needs in professional development programs and marketing career pathways.

VOBA's investment ask stemmed from program learning in FY24/ FY25:

- In the spring and fall of 2024, VOBA organized technical trainings in collaboration with 13 retailers and trail builder businesses, which trained 30 professionals as instructed by 18 technical experts.
- This spring, our collaboration has expanded to 20 retailers and trail builder businesses, and we anticipate training 64 professionals as instructed by 25 technical experts.

A snapshot of our programs include:

- Both entry - level and advanced trainings designed to expand the knowledge of current employees, those seeking employment in Vermont and those under-represented in occupations.
- Key was combination of hands-on learning and classroom instruction.

The same format was a success for ski and snowboard technicians. 100%

participated reported that the content added value to their professional knowledge and was useful in the work environment.

To market the trainings and facilitate job placement, VOBA will launch an online career portal this spring with information for job seekers and employers including job openings, training, education & career resources.

- Making these jobs real are the 10 spotlights on professionals in mechanics, manufacturing and instruction.

Circling back to the FY26 funding ask, \$250,000 would enable expansion of our seasonal professional development programs to train 100 professionals in high demand occupations by continuing technical training and expanding the program to target skill building in climate jobs which are essential to the industry's future.

- Education could focus on a range of skills from best management practices for trail builders to new technology for engineers reducing greenhouse gas emissions in manufacturing.
- Outcomes would include increased knowledge applied in the workplace, create a wider pipeline of professionals in highly skilled and higher paying jobs and expanded diversity representation in outdoor professions by women, Black, Indigenous and People of Color, LGBTQ people, and persons with disabilities.

The industry is strong despite years of pandemic and climate events because of consistent public and private investment in businesses and the recreation and community infrastructure the foundation for our livelihood.

- We know that climate strategy, entrepreneur innovation, and skill building pays dividends .
- We know the sector attracts young, active professionals to our communities to raise their families and enjoy health while improving our current aging demographic.

Thank you.

Training testimonial

“Helped to solidify knowledge and experience I had with a more thorough understanding along with introducing new information that will not only help my tech abilities, but my ability to communicate with customers.”

Outdoor Sector [Data](#):

US Bureau of Economic Analysis:

- Vermont was ranked second in the nation in 2023 for its \$2.1 billion in contributions to the state GDP which is 4.8% of Vermont’s economy.
- Outdoor goods manufacturing grew by 15% followed by increases in retail, accommodations and food services.
- Snow activities including skiing, snowboarding, and snowmobiling drive local economies with an increase of 29%.

Business Development:

- Fifty-eight percent of Move Forward Together Vermont survey respondents reported being impacted by recent climate events and identified that technical assistance resources such as state and federal grants, financial and business planning, and marketing analysis are valuable to outdoor businesses.
- Policy survey respondents highly prioritized flood recovery funding for physical, economic injury and recreation infrastructure as well as for research on climate risks to inform adaptation financing.

Workforce Development

- Sixty-five percent of outdoor businesses plan to hire 1-5 new employees in the next 12 months, however, they face challenges due to the cost of living (60%), lack of qualified applicants (58%), and lack of housing (56%).
- Businesses cited important investments as internships & apprenticeships, adult education, and career development for underserved communities.
- Businesses report that professional development training and effective in increased employee engagement (71%), consistent work processes (61%), and reduced skill gaps (54%).