



To: Senate Natural Resources and Energy Committee

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

February 13, 2026 Testimony

Overview

- **The Vermont legislature created Vermont's 14 conservation districts in 1939 as county-scale units of local government as part of the national response to dustbowl.**
- Districts work with towns and individual landowners as well as farmers. Districts:
 - Assess and upgrade culverts
 - **Remove dams**
 - Address invasive species
 - **Conserve and restore wildlife habitat**
 - **Plan and implement stormwater projects**
 - Protect and restore wetlands
 - Plant riparian buffers and **restore floodplains**
 - **Provide technical assistance to farms to help them comply with the Required Agricultural Practices**
- **In FY 25, districts planted 29,422 stems, assessed 101 culverts, and restored 170 acres of wetlands and treated 510 acres of invasive species.**
- 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 landowners and farmers 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 hired staff and shifted existing staff to help fill those gaps. We are currently seeking funding that if received will help us address more of those gaps.

District Funding Ask

- The governor's budget includes \$612,000 in the Agency of Agriculture, Food and Markets budget, which is what districts received in base funding last year. Districts were also awarded \$250,000 in one time funds. Thank you to Senator Watson for advocating for district funding. **We would like to retain those one-time funds and add them to our base, along with a modest increase to account for increases in health care and other costs for a total ask of \$948,200.**
- **This is the most flexible funding districts receive.**

- **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.**
- **For every \$1 districts receive in base funds, they leverage \$9 in additional funds.**
- **Many districts use the state funding to gather public input into local conservation needs, which in recent years has led to federal funds being set aside by the Natural Resources Conservation Service to address locally identified priorities. For this year, \$4.4M has been allocated to these Local Fund Pools.**
- The state allocation is also frequently used as matching funds for federal or state grants, or to pilot a program districts will then use other funds to expand.
- 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 VAAFM's 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.
- **The funding districts receive from the state is a crucial part of district budgets, providing stable, flexible funds districts can use to address a wide-range of conservation needs.**
- **We ask that the committee support our funding request.**