

VERMONT CONSERVATION PLAN
ROUND 2 REGIONAL
LISTENING SESSIONS
MEETING PACKET

February - March 2026



FOR MORE INFORMATION

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DEAR FRIENDS,

Thank you for your interest in the Vermont Conservation Plan and for joining us for this round of regional listening sessions. Whether you are engaging in this work for the first time or have been involved in conservation efforts in Vermont for many years, we are grateful for your time, perspective, and willingness to participate at this moment.

The Vermont Conservation Plan is being developed to carry out the vision and goals of Act 59, the Community Resilience and Biodiversity Protection Act, passed by the Vermont Legislature in 2023. The Act sets statewide conservation goals of conserving 30 percent of Vermont's land by 2030 and 50 percent by 2050. The Vermont Conservation Plan uses these goals as guiding benchmarks within Vermont's long-standing, holistic approach to conservation, one that integrates land protection with stewardship, working lands viability, watershed health, public benefit, and community resilience. The plan is a comprehensive roadmap for how Vermont can conserve and steward lands over time so that conserved lands function as a connected, resilient landscape that supports biodiversity, working farms and forests, and community well-being.

Why We Are Here Now

We are now at an important point in the planning process. Over the past several years, hundreds of Vermonters, including landowners, municipalities, conservation organizations, state agencies, and community members, have contributed ideas, concerns, and priorities through earlier phases of engagement and analysis. This round of listening sessions is intended to share how the plan is taking shape, to test emerging ideas, and to hear directly from you about what resonates, what needs refinement, and what may be missing.

As part of this engagement, we are sharing the **Draft Expanded Framework: Objectives, Pathways and Actions**. This document outlines an initial, working set of proposed objectives and actions intended to advance Act 59's vision and goals. It represents a first iteration of an "action framework" for the Vermont Conservation Plan. It is a work in progress that has been informed by public input to date and is being shared now to support discussion, reflection, and feedback. Your feedback will help shape how the plan evolves before it is finalized and submitted to the Legislature by the end of June.

How You Can Engage

Your participation in these listening sessions is a critical part of shaping the Vermont Conservation Plan. We invite you to engage in discussion, ask questions, and share your perspectives on the Draft Expanded Framework and the broader direction of the plan. Additional opportunities for public input will continue in the coming months, including online engagement through the project website.

With your input, we can develop a plan that helps guide near-term decisions in a thoughtful and strategic way, while honoring the full scope of Vermont's conservation vision for 2030 and beyond.

THANK YOU FOR BEING PART OF THIS WORK AND FOR HELPING TO SHAPE VERMONT'S CONSERVATION FUTURE.

Vision and Goals of Act 59: Community Resilience & Biodiversity Protection Act

- The **vision** of the State of Vermont is to maintain an ecologically functional landscape that sustains biodiversity, maintains landscape connectivity, supports watershed health, promotes climate resilience, supports working farms and forests, provides opportunities for recreation and appreciation of the natural world, and supports the historic settlement pattern of compact villages surrounded by rural lands and natural areas.
- **It is the goal of the State that 30 percent of Vermont's total land area shall be conserved by 2030, and 50 percent of the State's total land area shall be conserved by 2050.** The Secretary of Natural Resources shall lead the effort in achieving these goals. The land conserved shall include State, federal, municipal, and private land.
- **Reaching 30 percent by 2030 and 50 percent by 2050 shall include a mix of ecological reserve areas, biodiversity conservation areas, and natural resource management areas.** In order to support an ecologically functional and connected landscape with sustainable production of natural resources and recreational opportunities, **the approximate percentages of each type of conservation category shall be guided by the principles of conservation science and the conservation targets within Vermont Conservation Design**, prioritizing ecological reserve areas to protect highest priority natural communities and maintain or restore old forests.

Key Definitions

- **Ecological reserve area:** an area having permanent protection from conversion and that is managed to maintain a natural state within which natural ecological processes and disturbance events are allowed to proceed with minimal interference.
- **Biodiversity conservation area:** an area having permanent protection from conversion for the majority of the area and that is managed for the primary goal of sustaining species or habitats. These areas may include regular, active interventions to address the needs of particular species or to maintain or restore habitats.
- **Natural resource management area:** an area having permanent protection from conversion for the majority of the area but that is subject to long-term, sustainable land management.
- **Sustainable land management:** the stewardship and use of forests and forestlands, grasslands, wetlands, riparian areas, and other lands, including the types of agricultural lands that support biodiversity, in a way, and at a rate, that maintains or restores their biodiversity, productivity, regeneration capacity, vitality, and their potential to fulfill, now and in the future, relevant ecological, economic, and social functions at local, State, and regional levels, and that does not degrade ecosystem function.
- **Conserved:** permanently protected and meeting the definition of ecological reserve area, biodiversity conservation area, or natural resource management area as defined in this section for purposes of meeting the 30 percent goal in subsection 2802(b) of this title.

Stakeholders as Defined by Act 59

Private owners of forestlands and agricultural lands, land trusts, conservation organizations, environmental organizations, working lands enterprises, outdoor recreation groups and businesses, Indigenous groups and representatives from historically marginalized and disadvantaged communities, watershed groups, municipalities, regional planning commissions, conservation commissions, and relevant State and federal agencies.

ACT 59 FACT SHEET (CONT.)

Equity Considerations

- **Legislative finding** recognizes that Vermont is the traditional and unceded home of the Abenaki people; that BIPOC Vermonters and others from historically marginalized and disadvantaged communities have not had equal access to land and land-based enterprise; and that conservation planning process must address strategies for equity of access.
- 10 V.S.A. § 2803 requires initial conserved land equity to include an **equity assessment** of Vermont’s existing land protection and conservation programs and strategies.
- 10 V.S.A. § 2804 requires VHCB and ANR to lead **inclusive outreach** to inform conservation plan development.

Phase 1: Conservation Inventory – Completed June 30, 2024

An assessment of existing and potential conservation data, practices, programs, equity, and funding with recommended next steps (July 1, 2023 – June 30, 2024).

Final Inventory Results for 2024	
Ecological Reserve Areas	240,060 acres
Biodiversity Conservation Areas	235,950 acres
Forestland & Natural Cover	927,398 acres
Agricultural & Open Land	173,380 acres
Uncategorized Conserved Land (not included)	47,595 acres
Total of Conserved Land is 1,576,788 acres of 5,889,121 total acres (~27%)	

Phase 2: Conservation Plan – Due June 30, 2026

A comprehensive strategy for achieving the vision and goals of the Community Resilience and Biodiversity Protection Act (July 1, 2024 – June 30, 2026), including, per Act 59:

1. a comprehensive strategy for achieving the vision and goals of section 2802 of this title while continuing to conserve and protect Vermont’s agricultural land, working forests, historic properties, recreational lands, and surface waters;
2. the implementation methods for achieving the vision and goals of this chapter using Vermont Conservation Design as a guide;
3. recommendations to provide and increase equitable access to protected and conserved lands and land-based enterprises, including recreational access to and use of conserved lands; and
4. recommendations to implement the vision and goals of this chapter while also enhancing the State of Vermont’s current investments and commitments to working lands enterprises, rural landowners, and the broad conservation mission implemented by the Secretary and VHCB, including conservation of agricultural land, working forests, historic properties, recreational lands, and surface waters.

»»»» DRAFT EXPANDED FRAMEWORK: CONTEXT AND REVIEW GUIDANCE

The following Draft Expanded Framework Report outlines an initial, draft “action plan,” and was produced by Vermont Housing and Conservation Board, in consultation with Vermont’s Agency of Natural Resources. It is aimed at fulfilling the vision and goals of Act 59, The Community Resilience and Biodiversity Protection Act, passed by the Vermont Legislature in 2023.

The attached set of objectives and proposed actions is still very much a work in progress. It has been shaped by significant public input received from hundreds of individuals and stakeholders over the last three years. As we share this working draft, we welcome input on what works, what could be articulated more clearly, and whether key concepts are missing. Equally importantly, we hope to hear about key priorities within the framework, recognizing that this draft is broad and even if additional resources are made available, not every action may be actionable immediately. We expect this draft to evolve significantly in the coming months, and there will be additional opportunities for public input ahead as we continue our work to submit a finalized version to the legislature at the end of June.

Plan Ambition and Scope

The Community Resilience and Biodiversity Protection Act, sets a bold mandate for Vermont: an ecologically functional landscape that sustains biodiversity, supports working farms and forests, strengthens community resilience, and reinforces compact settlement patterns. To help advance that vision, the Act established the goals of conserving 30% of Vermont’s land by 2030 and 50% by 2050. Phase I found that roughly 27% of the state is already conserved, leaving approximately 180,000 additional acres to conserve by 2030. As you may be all aware, the influx of federal resources that was anticipated when Act 59 passed will not be available at the same levels expected at the time. Achieving this pace of conservation while also sustaining core investments in farms, forests, and water quality, would be unprecedented in Vermont’s history, underscoring the aspirational breadth and depth of this draft plan even if those federal resources were available.

The enclosed actions have been drafted with the intention of honoring the Act’s vision, goals, and the scale of challenges described in its findings. While we acknowledge that implementing the full suite of enclosed proposed actions is beyond current funding capacity, we lay them out deliberately to describe what is needed, not just what feels immediately feasible. In short, the actions describe a path forward for conservation in Vermont, even though this broad scope of actions would require an extended timeline and significant new resources that are not presently available.

DRAFT EXPANDED FRAMEWORK: CONTEXT AND REVIEW GUIDANCE (CONT.)

Prioritization in a Limited-Resource Environment

Because the plan is intended to be comprehensive, we recognize that not everything can be tackled at once. In the short term, Vermont's financial and organizational resources are limited, so it will be necessary to prioritize the most critical and feasible actions first. Difficult decisions lie ahead about where to focus efforts in the next few years. At the same time, the challenges driving this plan are urgent and mounting. Climate change, biodiversity loss, food security, and flood vulnerability are already shaping Vermont's communities and landscapes. We expect that as these realities become more evident, the funding and capacity landscape will evolve. While it will be critical to focus limited resources on high-impact early actions now, it is equally important to position Vermont to capitalize on future opportunities to implement the full set of pathways and actions through 2030 and beyond. The coming years will require the thoughtful sequencing of work, adaptation as conditions change, and staying focused on measurable progress toward the Act 59 goals.

Vermont's Unique Strengths and Landscape Role

Even as we grapple with constraints, Vermont brings distinct strengths and opportunities to this effort. We benefit from a deep and committed conservation community that includes nonprofits, agencies, landowners, and volunteers, and we have repeatedly heard a willingness to collaborate to achieve Act 59's vision and goals. Vermont also plays an outsized regional role as a critical wildlife corridor in the Northeast, helping plants and animals move and adapt as the climate changes. The Green Mountain spine and our network of conserved lands connect larger areas across the region, supporting long-term biodiversity resilience.

Vermont is also a key piece of the puzzle for regional food security: our working farms contribute not only to Vermont's food system but to New England's as well. New England Feeding New England has set a goal of sourcing 30% of the region's food within New England by 2030, an effort in which Vermont's agricultural land will be instrumental. These strengths give us a foundation to build on and reinforce our responsibility to meet this moment. While the plan is ambitious, we have much to feel positive about and there are many willing hands ready to help carry this work forward.

DRAFT EXPANDED FRAMEWORK: CONTEXT AND REVIEW GUIDANCE (CONT.)

Balancing Bold Aspirations with Practical Considerations

Throughout the planning process, VHCB has worked to balance bold innovations and justice-driven aspirations with an honest assessment of institutional capacity and constraints. Many stakeholders urged us to be visionary and equity-focused, emphasizing that biodiversity and climate resilience are undermined by growing disconnection from land and by economic structures that make basic needs contingent on profit. We heard a consistent concern that if conservation benefits are accessible mainly to those with discretionary wealth, conservation becomes a luxury, exacerbating environmental injustice and weakening the broad, durable support needed for long-term biodiversity and climate resilience investments. This feedback aligns with VHCB's long-standing mission to expand access to affordable housing for all Vermonters, keep agricultural land in production and affordable for future generations of farmers, and support public access to conserved lands, as well as Act 59's call to broaden who benefits from conservation. We have embraced this thinking and the emphasis on equity and durable public support that it enables.

At the same time, the plan's implementation must be paced realistically given current capacity and funding and ensure that critical existing programs continue. From our perspective, this is not an either-or choice; it is about strengthening core programs while ensuring they deliver broader and more equitable benefits. We recognize this will require careful alignment: we must remain focused on the conservation community's shared commitments to equity while grounding implementation in current capacity and a feasible path forward. Our hope is that the enclosed actions reflect the appropriate balance. Some actions advance new and ambitious work, including equity-centered tools and approaches, while others strengthen and modernize the foundational programs and delivery systems needed to implement the full suite of actions. Our intent is to develop a plan that is both inspiring and credible, motivating big-picture progress while supporting tangible near-term advances.

How You Can Help

As we share these draft actions, we welcome your critical insight. Your review at this moment, as we prepare for stakeholder feedback over the coming months, will help refine the plan into its best form. Within this packet you will find a page of questions following each Objective for you to consider as you review the actions under each pathway. We invite you to submit your feedback through the Vermont Conservation Plan website (www.vermontconservationplan.com), where you will find a survey to fill out for each Objective. In addition, we welcome you to submit comments via email to vcpadmin@vhcb.org.

We look forward to hearing your recommendations on how to sharpen and prioritize these actions. With your input, we can develop a comprehensive plan that can help guide near-term decisions in a thoughtful and strategic way while honoring the full scope of Vermont's conservation vision for 2030 and beyond. Thank you for your dedication to this work and for helping guide Vermont's conservation future.

»»»» DRAFT OBJECTIVE 1: CENTER VERMONT CONSERVATION DESIGN

This objective is focused on how to protect, restore and maintain an ecologically functioning and connected natural and working landscape.

This objective is guided by Vermont Conservation Design (VCD), a science-based framework to protect the lands, waters, plants and wildlife that are most critical to an ecologically functional landscape. Vermont Conservation Design (VCD) allows us to identify where we can build upon our existing network of conserved lands in ways that advance the ecological goals envisioned by Act 59. The VCD framework highlights the need to promote conservation at all scales – from large forest blocks and riparian corridors to rare natural communities and species with specific habitat needs – to ensure we maintain and enhance ecological function and connection.

Pathway 1: Expand Ecological Representation

This pathway is focused on increasing conservation across all nine biophysical regions, and places additional focus on the six under-represented biophysical regions, ensuring that these places and their biodiversity will be conserved.

Contribution toward Act 59 Vision and Goals and Equity Considerations:

Vision: This pathway will advance most if not all of the elements of the Act 59 vision to promote: an ecologically functional landscape, biodiversity, landscape connectivity, watershed health, climate resilience, working farms and forests and opportunities for recreation and appreciation of the natural world.

Goals: This pathway will advance the 2030 and 2050 goals of Act 59 by conserving a mix of ERAs, BCAs and NRMAs as guided by VCD.

Equity Considerations: Conserving land in underrepresented biophysical regions will increase access to conserved lands for residents in regions with less access to such lands for recreation and appreciation of the natural world.

Complementary Initiatives and Programs: Work under this pathway supports and is supported by the Forest Future Roadmap, Forest Action Plan, Wildlife Action Plan, Move Forward Together Vermont, Climate Action Plan, Forest Legacy Program Assessment of Need.

Actions to Expand Ecological Representation

Pathway 1 Action 1: Increase Conservation Across All Biophysical Regions. Permanently conserve more land in the Champlain Valley, Champlain Hills, Taconic Mountains, Vermont Valley, Northern Piedmont, and Southern Piedmont biophysical regions.

Related Sub-Actions

- VHCB will review its Natural Areas Funding Policy and Privately Owned Working Forests Policy to consider how it can better prioritize and target funds to projects in specific, under-represented biophysical regions. This review will include how to enhance the capacity of organizations working in underrepresented regions in order to facilitate increased project development.
- Update the Forest Legacy Area, the area designated for Forest Legacy Program investments, to better center around Vermont Conservation Design. *Lead Implementor: FPR*
- Continue to expand its technical assistance about Vermont Conservation Design to assist land protection organizations and help them identify priority locations. *Lead Implementor: VFWD*

DRAFT OBJECTIVE 1: CENTER VERMONT CONSERVATION DESIGN (CONT.)

Actions to Expand Ecological Representation (cont.)

Pathway 1 Action 2: Increase and Optimize Funding Through VHCB for Projects in Underrepresented Biophysical Regions. VHCB will provide funding and support that are commensurate with the land values and project costs in these fragmented, parcelized, and highly-developed regions.

Related Sub-Actions

- Conservation funders and partners across Vermont's conservation community will explore how to expand and align funding for natural areas and working forests. This includes ensuring adequate support for the higher project costs incurred by land trusts and state agencies advancing priority projects in underrepresented regions. *Lead Implementor: VHCB*
- Prioritize conservation quality and strategic location within 30x30. Achieving the ecological goals of Vermont Conservation Design within the 30x30 framework requires a commitment to not only the quantity of land conserved, but also its quality and strategic location. This requires prioritizing investments in underrepresented biophysical regions where land values and project costs are higher and conservation outcomes are critical, even if this results in slower progress toward acreage targets. *Lead Implementor: VHCB & ANR*

Pathway 1 Action 3: Continue to Protect Strategic Parcels to Expand Connected Networks. Prioritize strategic, focused conservation investments in the Northern Green Mountains, Southern Green Mountains, and Northeastern Highlands biophysical regions.

Related Sub-Actions

- VHCB will review its Natural Areas Funding Policy and Privately Owned Working Forest Policy to consider how it can better prioritize projects that: are exceptionally large; expand and/or connect existing conserved lands; protect underrepresented natural communities or habitat types, (such as grasslands and old forests); make substantial contributions to protecting aquatic systems and/or ecological connectivity. This review will include how to enhance the capacity of partner organizations capable of developing projects that meet these criteria.

Implementing Partners – Private owners of forestlands and agricultural lands, land trusts, conservation organizations, environmental organizations, working lands enterprises, outdoor recreation groups and businesses, Indigenous groups and representatives from historically marginalized and disadvantaged communities, watershed groups, municipalities, regional planning commissions, conservation commissions, and relevant State and federal agencies.

Pathway 2: Protect Connectivity Corridors

This pathway identifies ways to protect landscape-scale corridors within Vermont's regional connectivity network that are conservation priorities, promote overall forest health and function, and keep corridors connected. This pathway identifies a subset of places most in need for permanent land conservation, but the entire connectivity network is needed for ecological function.

Contribution toward Act 59 Vision and Goals and Equity Considerations:

Vision: This pathway will advance the elements of the Act 59 vision to promote: an ecologically functional landscape, biodiversity, landscape connectivity, watershed health, climate resilience, working farms and forests and opportunities for recreation and appreciation of the natural world.

Goals: This pathway will advance the 2030 and 2050 goals through the conservation of a mix of ERAs, BCAs and NRMAs guided by VCD.

Equity Considerations: Protecting landscape-scale ecological connectivity helps ensure robust and healthy populations of plants and animals throughout the state, to the benefit of all the people of Vermont.

Complementary Initiatives and Programs: Work under this pathway supports and is supported by the Forest Future Roadmap, Forest Action Plan, Wildlife Action Plan, Move Forward Together Vermont, Climate Action Plan, Forest Legacy Program Assessment of Need.

Actions to Protect Connectivity Corridors

Pathway 2 Action 1: Conserve more land within the ten Connectivity Focus Areas that are part of Vermont's regional connectivity network. These ten focus areas are identified in the report, *Implementing Vermont Conservation Design: Priorities for Using Permanent Land Protection to Maintain an Ecologically Functional Landscape* (March 2025).

Related Sub-Actions

- Promote collaboration across organizations through its involvement in the Staying Connected Initiative to develop a shared sense of community and place associated with each of the ten focus areas. Use the successful models of the Shutesville Hill Wildlife Corridor and Reconnecting the Greens – Mansfield to Camels Hump Wildlife Corridor. *Lead Implementer: ANR*
- VHCB will review its Natural Areas Funding Policy and Privately Owned Working Forests Policy to consider how it can better prioritize and target funds to projects within the Highest Priority Connectivity blocks, with a particular emphasis on the ten connectivity focus areas. This review will include how to enhance the capacity of partner organizations capable of developing projects that meet these criteria.
- VHCB will review funding match requirements to be applied in those instances in which organizations have a formal agreement to work collaboratively on a conservation focus area.
- Coordinate with partner agencies and organizations in neighboring states and Canadian provinces, to ensure a regionally connected network of lands and waters. *Lead Implementer: ANR*

DRAFT OBJECTIVE 1: CENTER VERMONT CONSERVATION DESIGN (CONT.)

Actions to Protect Connectivity Corridors (cont.)

Pathway 2 Action 2: Manage and upgrade roads and other transportation infrastructure (bridges, culverts, etc.) to allow for wildlife passage, especially in areas that complement permanent land conservation.

Related Sub-Actions

- Collaborate with VTrans to implement appropriate sizing of the 1,285 structures identified in the Wildlife Transportation Action Plan. *Lead Implementor: VFWD*
- VHCB will review its Natural Area Funding Policy and Privately Owned Working Forest Policy to consider how to better prioritize funding for conservation projects along road segments that have structures identified in the Wildlife Transportation Action Plan. This review will include how to enhance the capacity of organizations working to develop conservation projects along these road segments.

Pathway 2 Action 3: Encourage municipal and regional land use planning that supports ecological connectivity to help ensure the larger landscape benefits wildlife and strengthens regional land conservation efforts.

Related Sub-Actions

- Continue to provide technical assistance about Vermont Conservation Design to regional and municipal planning efforts. Support funding for connecting science to communities. *Lead Implementor: VFWD*
- Support financial and human capacity within municipalities to strengthen land use planning and regulation. *Lead Implementor: TBD*
- Maintain the BioFinder website as the authoritative source for data and maps of Vermont Conservation Design. *Lead Implementor: VFWD*

Implementing Partners: The Staying Connected Initiative's Vermont Chapter is the key umbrella for coordinating connectivity conservation. The chapter includes land trusts, conservation organizations, environmental organizations, regional planning commissions, and state and federal agencies. The collaborative is open and inclusive to all groups interested in promoting and contributing to ecological connectivity. Vermont Fish and Wildlife Department and The Nature Conservancy play a key role in convening and facilitating this group's work. On the ground conservation of connectivity corridors also includes individual landowners, watershed groups, municipalities, and conservation commissions.

Pathway 3: Improve Forest Structure

This pathway addresses the current underrepresentation of certain biophysical regions and associated forest types in Ecological Reserve Areas. It also aims to identify strategic locations for establishing Biodiversity Conservation and Natural Resource Management Areas. Actions taken under this pathway will improve representation of both old and young forests as well as the complexity and diversity of forest structure across the landscape.

Contribution toward Act 59 Vision and Goals and Equity Considerations:

Vision: This pathway will advance the elements of the Act 59 vision to promote: an ecologically functional landscape, biodiversity, landscape connectivity, watershed health, climate resilience, working farms and forests and opportunities for recreation and appreciation of the natural world.

Goals: This pathway will move Vermont towards the goal of 30x30 and 50x50 through a mix of ERAs, BCAs and NRMAs guided by VCD.

Equity Considerations: Conserving land in underrepresented biophysical regions will increase proximity and access to conserved lands for residents of those regions.

Complementary Initiatives and Programs: Work under this pathway supports and is supported by the Forest Future Roadmap, Forest Action Plan, Wildlife Action Plan, Move Forward Together Vermont, Climate Action Plan, Forest Legacy Program Assessment of Need.

Actions to Improve Forest Structure

Pathway 3 Action 1: Improve representation of future old forests by strategically establishing Ecological Reserve Areas in biophysical regions outside the Northern and Southern Green Mountains.

Related Sub-Actions

- Prioritize the establishment of new ecological reserves in the Champlain Valley, Champlain Hills, Taconic Mountains, Vermont Valley, Northeastern Highlands, Northern Piedmont, and Southern Piedmont biophysical regions, to contribute to the old forest targets and the ecological representation goals outlined in Vermont Conservation Design. Representing all widespread forest types in ecological reserves will require new land conservation, not just the reclassification of existing conserved lands. *Lead Implementor: VHCB & ANR*
- Implement the recommendations from the Act 59 State Lands Working Group of statutory and administrative designations for ecological reserves, and apply them using landscape-scale conservation science and ANR's LRMP and public input process. *Lead Implementor: ANR*
- Continue to develop and refine scientific analyses and tools that will help inform the appropriate locations for establishing ecological reserves on public lands, non-profit conservation lands, and private lands easements. *Lead Implementor: ANR*
- Ensure landowners are aware of their options for enrollment in UVA categories that promote old forest characteristics, including the Reserve Forestland Category and Ecologically Significant Treatment Areas (ESTAs). Explore opportunities to broaden enrollment in these categories, and to incentivize mapping and management of ESTAs. *Lead Implementor: ANR*

DRAFT OBJECTIVE 1: CENTER VERMONT CONSERVATION DESIGN (CONT.)

Actions to Improve Forest Structure (cont.)

Pathway 3 Action 2: Manage for a balance of forest structure, including young and old forests, in Biodiversity Conservation Areas and Natural Resource Management Areas.

Related Sub-Actions

- Encourage both passive and active management practices that enhance the development of young and old forest structure. *Lead Implementor: VHCB & ANR*
- Collaborate on shared messaging from both public land managers and non-profit conservation organizations about the values of multiple forest management strategies, and the biodiversity values of both old and young forests. *Lead Implementor: ANR*
- Support the forest economy to help maintain forests as forest, and to offer landowners commercial opportunities for conducting active management and restoration of both old and young forest structure. *Lead Implementor: FPR*

Key Partners: Private owners of forestlands and agricultural lands, land trusts, conservation organizations, environmental organizations, working lands enterprises, outdoor recreation groups and businesses, Indigenous groups and representatives from historically marginalized and disadvantaged communities, watershed groups, municipalities, regional planning commissions, conservation commissions, and relevant State and federal agencies.

Pathway 4: Support Aquatic Systems

This pathway identifies the actions needed to steward, manage, and restore riparian areas and aquatic systems on both new and existing conserved lands.

Contribution toward Act 59 Vision and Goals and Equity Considerations:

Vision: This pathway will advance the elements of the Act 59 vision to promote: an ecologically functional landscape, biodiversity, landscape connectivity, watershed health, climate resilience, working farms and forests and opportunities for recreation and appreciation of the natural world.

Goals: This pathway will advance the goals of Act 59 by moving Vermont towards the goal of 30x30 and 50x50 through a mix of ERAs, BCAs and NRMAs guided by VCD and enhance the State of Vermont's current investments and commitments to the broad conservation mission implemented by the Secretary and VHCB, including conservation of agricultural lands, working forests, historic properties, recreational lands, and surface waters.

Equity Considerations: Equity in aquatic systems work means prioritizing protection and restoration in communities facing the greatest risks from flooding and drought, drinking-water vulnerabilities, and lack of safe access to rivers and lakes for cooling and recreation. Use environmental justice and health/vulnerability mapping to target high-need places and fund projects with clear outcomes (flood mitigation, source-water protection, water quality, and public access), paired with community support so impacted communities help set priorities; where floodplain buyouts occur, pair them with relocation/housing supports and permanently protect vacated lands for durable river-corridor and floodplain function.

Complementary Initiatives and Programs: Work under this pathway supports and is supported by the Forest Future Roadmap, Forest Action Plan, Wildlife Action Plan, Move Forward Together Vermont, Climate Action Plan, Forest Legacy Program Assessment of Need, Act 76 programs, Tactical Basin Planning, and TMDL Implementation.

Actions to Support Aquatic Systems

Pathway 4 Action 1: Enhance the protection, stewardship, and restoration of riparian areas and aquatic systems on both new and existing conserved lands.

Related Sub-Actions

- Continue to encourage conservation easements to have specific language protecting aquatic and riparian resources. *Lead Implementor: VHCB*
- VHCB will review its Funding of Agricultural Land Policy and Option to Purchase at Agricultural Value Acquisition Policy to consider how it can better facilitate the maintenance and/or establishment of appropriately sized vegetated riparian areas to protect water resources on farms, including wetlands, perennial streams, intermittent streams and other surface water conveyances through additional incentives and technical assistance at the time of conservation.
- Update the surface waters and riparian areas layer of Vermont Conservation Design to incorporate the most recent, high-resolution data associated with these features. Better mapping will help conservation organizations set priorities. *Lead Implementor: ANR*

Actions to Support Aquatic Systems (cont.)

Pathway 4 Action 2: Expand funding available for the stewardship, management, and restoration of riparian areas and aquatic systems, both for new and existing conserved lands.

Related Sub-Actions

- Explore the establishment of a funding target and pilot program to protect and restore, where necessary, appropriately sized vegetated riparian areas and wetland areas and associated buffers on already conserved farms. *Lead Implementor: VHCB*
- Explore expanding the focus of clean water protection funding programs beyond phosphorus reduction to include other freshwater and flood resilience benefits. *Lead Implementor: TBD*
- Explore the establishment of a funding target and pilot program to fund implementation of priority floodplain restoration projects identified in Tactical Basin Plans to advance clean water and flood resilience objectives, including protection of downtowns, village centers and critical infrastructure. *Lead Implementor: VHCB*

The actions included in this pathway will involve collaboration with the key stakeholders named in the law which includes private owners of forestlands and agricultural lands, land trusts, conservation organizations, environmental organizations, working lands enterprises, outdoor recreation groups and businesses, Indigenous groups and representatives from historically marginalized and disadvantaged communities, watershed groups, municipalities, regional planning commissions, conservation commissions, and relevant State and federal agencies. marginalized and disadvantaged communities, watershed groups, municipalities, regional planning commissions, conservation commissions, and relevant State and federal agencies.

Pathway 5: Protect Rare and Significant Ecological Features

This pathway highlights the need to enhance and increase the protection of rare and uncommon species, significant natural communities, and the important habitats of Vermont Conservation Design.

Contribution toward Act 59 Vision and Goals and Equity Considerations:

Vision: This pathway will advance the elements of the Act 59 vision to promote: an ecologically functional landscape, biodiversity, landscape connectivity, watershed health, climate resilience, working farms and forests and opportunities for recreation and appreciation of the natural world.

Goals: This pathway will advance the goals of Act 59 by moving Vermont towards the goal of 30x30 and 50x50 through a mix of ERAs, BCAs and NRMAs guided by VCD.

Complementary Initiatives and Programs: Work under this pathway supports and is supported by the Wildlife Action Plan, and Vermont's Threatened and Endangered Species statute.

Actions to Protect Rare and Significant Ecological Features

Pathway 5 Action 1: Make inventory and protection of rare species, significant natural communities, and important habitats a standard part of the conservation process.

Related Sub-Actions

- VHCB will continue to make feasibility funds available for the completion of ecological inventories. A field inventory of significant ecological features should be a standard due diligence practice.
- Address the conservation of rare species, significant natural communities, and important habitats when funding new conservation projects. Encourage the use of Special Treatment Areas in conservation easements, which may be considered Ecological Reserve Areas and Biodiversity Conservation Areas, to protect rare and important features where feasible and appropriate. Formalize protection for significant ecological features where they occur on already conserved lands. *Lead Implementor: VHCB*
- Support efforts to inventory significant ecological features on both already conserved lands, and private lands that are not conserved. *Lead Implementor: VHCB*

Actions to Protect Rare and Significant Ecological Features (cont.)

Pathway 5 Action 2: Use flexible funding strategies to **conserve rare species, significant natural communities, and important habitats.**

Related Sub-Actions

- Encourage and consider natural area projects that bundle parcels based on resource type (e.g. rare species populations) rather than just locational proximity to provide funding applicants with an opportunity to leverage match and more effectively and efficiently realize conservation benefits at this scale. *Lead Implementor: VHCB*
- Develop a list of funding sources tied to rare, threatened, and endangered species (i.e. Section 6 funds, Recovery Land Acquisition Grants and make it available to conservation organizations to encourage more use of these funds in permanent conservation. *Lead Implementor: VHCB*
- Enhance funding and support for stewardship and management of conserved lands with rare and important features. *Lead Implementor: VHCB*

Key Partners: The actions included in this pathways will involve collaboration with the key stakeholders named in the law which includes private owners of forestlands and agricultural lands, land trusts, conservation organizations, environmental organizations, working lands enterprises, outdoor recreation groups and businesses, Indigenous groups and representatives from historically marginalized and disadvantaged communities, watershed groups, municipalities, regional planning commissions, conservation commissions, and relevant State and federal agencies.

»»»»» DRAFT OBJECTIVE 2: CONSERVATION FOR COMMUNITIES

This objective is focused on how to better connect people and communities to the land. It aims to advance conservation in ways that benefit people and communities by protecting natural and working lands, enhancing recreation, and supporting equitable access.

Conservation investments benefit people and communities and make our lands and watersheds healthier. The conservation of natural and working forests and agricultural lands and the expansion of recreational and educational opportunities all connect people with the land. All these benefits help fulfill the overall vision of CRBPA - Act 59.

Pathway 1: Increase Equitable Access

This pathway identifies investments and programmatic opportunities to expand and improve equitable access to conserved lands, land-based enterprises and recreational opportunities.

Contribution toward Act 59 Vision and Goals and Equity Considerations:

Vision: This pathway supports Act 59’s vision of an ecologically functional landscape that supports Vermont’s communities and livelihoods by ensuring all people can directly benefit from conserved lands and land-based enterprises. Equitable conservation builds long-term public support and strengthens stewardship. By making access to conserved lands, land-based enterprises and conservation decision making more equitable, we will build the durable public support needed to sustain the Act’s vision over time.

Goals: This pathway directly contributes to the 2030 and 2050 conservation goals by emphasizing Act 59’s planning mandate that a growing share of conservation investments directly benefit underrepresented communities. This includes ensuring conserved farmland is affordable for new and beginning farmers, advancing more community forests and community-governed open spaces, and supporting other projects that expand durable access, tenure, and use for marginalized Vermonters while maintaining meaningful public access for hunting, fishing, foraging and other recreation as more private lands become posted. Because Act 59 is a long-term, statewide project, equitable access is foundational: it builds durable public support that makes sustained progress possible across all of the Act’s goals, including biodiversity and climate resilience.

Equity Considerations: This pathway is focused on addressing longstanding inequities in who owns, accesses, and benefits from land and conservation programs. It recognizes that land and land use decisions are largely defined by market conditions that, without intervention, can extract wealth and consolidate it in fewer hands. Public investments in conservation must consider the economic and related factors that perpetuate inequitable access to land. It centers Vermonters who have been historically marginalized or excluded from land ownership and decision-making—including BIPOC and Indigenous communities, low-income residents, immigrants and refugees, and young or otherwise undercapitalized farmers and foresters, and others facing barriers to land access and participation. By embedding equity criteria in funding, co-designing tools with affected communities, and supporting alternative tenure and ownership models, this pathway aims to close gaps in land access and ensure that Act 59 implementation does not reinforce or exacerbate existing disparities.

Complementary Initiatives and Programs: This pathway will be coordinated with and build upon existing efforts to advance equity in land access and conservation, including the work of the Land Access and Opportunity Board (LAOB), and Vermont’s Environmental Justice Office, Food Security Roadmap, Climate Action Plan, and Vermont Agriculture & Food System Plan.

DRAFT OBJECTIVE 2: CONSERVATION FOR COMMUNITIES (CONT.)

Actions to Increase Equitable Access

Pathway 1 Action 1: Increase Equitable Access to Protected and Conserved Land and Land-Based Enterprises. These actions will ensure that the benefits of land conservation – including opportunities to own or manage land – are accessible to groups historically marginalized from land ownership. This includes BIPOC Vermonters, low-income residents, immigrants and refugees, and young or beginning farmers and forest landowners.

Related Sub-Actions

- **Expand and modernize farmland affordability tools.** Grow and update Vermont’s land conservation programs that prioritize underserved farmers and embed permanent affordability in farmland, including the Option to Purchase at Agricultural Value (OPAV) program and other affordability tools that work for diverse farm types and ownership models. *Lead Implementor(s): VHCB*
- **Identify inclusive land ownership and tenure models.** Facilitate alternative ownership and land-tenure arrangements that empower communities and advance community-led land projects. This includes addressing legal and financial barriers for current programs, as well as establishing new programs or funding mechanisms to enable cooperatives, community land trusts, Tribal ownership and long-term leases. *Lead Implementor(s): VHCB, LAOB, Farm to Plate*
- **Establish a Land Access Equity Fund.** Design a dedicated fund to help underrepresented Vermonters acquire land, with input from equity/community organizations, conservation funders, land trusts, agricultural and mission-driven lenders, technical assistance providers, and farm/forest industry stakeholders. *Lead Implementor(s): VHCB & LAOB*
- **Build a Climate-Resilient Vermont Food Security System.** Implement the Vermont Food Security Roadmap in order to ensure every Vermonter can reliably access nutritious, culturally appropriate food. *Lead Implementor(s): Farm to Plate*
- **Expand community-owned and community-access lands for nature and food.** Strengthen and grow community forests and community gardens—alongside other community-access lands—in partnership with municipalities and their conservation commissions and conservation organizations of all sizes, so all Vermonters can engage in food production and have meaningful access to nature and outdoor spaces. *Lead Implementor(s): VHCB, LAOB, and other conservation partners.*

DRAFT OBJECTIVE 2: CONSERVATION FOR COMMUNITIES (CONT.)

Actions to Increase Equitable Access (cont.)

Pathway 1 Action 2: Center Equity in Conservation Decisions and Funding. Ensure that Vermont's conservation efforts are guided by a clear understanding of who benefits, who has historically been left out or burdened, and what communities need, so that access to planning, decision-making, and the benefits of land conservation are more equitably distributed.

Related Sub-Actions

- **Conduct a statewide equity gap analysis.** Review, consistent with principles of environmental justice, the distribution of burdens and benefits generated by land conservation efforts in order to pinpoint any disparities and generate clear, near-term recommendations to increase equitable access to conserved lands and land-based enterprises. *Lead Implementor(s): VHCB & LAOB*
- **Establish an equity framework for conservation funding.** As an additional output from the gap analysis described above, develop an equity framework, building on the gap analysis findings, to help guide outreach, application scoring, benefit-sharing, and reporting for all conservation funding programs. *Lead Implementor(s): VHCB & LAOB*
- **Improve, expand, and diversify civic engagement, leadership, and decision making.** Improve public engagement processes to promote community ownership of conservation priorities and outcomes. Support skilled facilitation that encourages constructive dialogue and creative tension, so engagement surfaces a wider range of perspectives and avoids reinforcing a narrow set of ideas. Work with regional and municipal partners to understand competing land uses and to develop community wide, holistic strategies for prioritizing and stacking land uses where appropriate. Move land use conversations out of sector-based siloes and into broader community conversations. Promote plain language and empowering civic engagement training and educational opportunities so more Vermonters can participate meaningfully in conservation decisions. *Lead Implementor(s): VHCB & LAOB*

Implementing Partners: Equity and community-based organizations; land trusts and conservation organizations; municipalities and conservation commissions; agricultural and working-lands organizations; mission-driven and community lenders; philanthropic funders; and relevant state agencies and quasi-public entities.

Pathway 2: Promote Sustainable Working Lands

This pathway identifies strategies and investments to make Vermont's conserved working lands more resilient, ecologically functional, and economically thriving, while continuing to invest in working lands conservation. It also addresses the economic and land use pressures that contribute to farmland loss and forest fragmentation by supporting the viability of farm and forest enterprises. In addition, this pathway emphasizes technical and financial supports that make ecologically beneficial land management practices viable for landowners.

Contribution toward Act 59 Vision and Goals and Equity Considerations:

Vision: This pathway will help sustain biodiversity, maintain landscape connectivity, support working farms and forests and watershed health, promote climate resilience, and support Vermont's historic pattern of compact settlements surrounded by rural lands and natural areas. By protecting public and private land for active agricultural and forest use, enhancing working-lands enterprise viability, and expanding technical assistance and resources for landowners, this pathway will strengthen protection of waterways, wetlands, special natural communities, and forest areas that connect to and support receiving waters and large forest blocks.

Goals: This pathway directly supports the Act 59 conservation goals by expanding the permanent protection of working forests and agricultural land. In addition, this pathway indirectly supports conservation and connectivity goals by slowing the loss and fragmentation of working forests and agricultural land. Keeping working lands economically viable and in the hands of conservation-minded forest landowners and farmers furthers important ecological values and working land outcomes while simultaneously strengthening the pipeline of high-quality conservation opportunities.

Equity Considerations: This pathway includes actions that support land access and secure tenure for new, beginning, and historically underserved farmers and forest landowners. These investments promote equitable outcomes while strengthening forest and community-scale food economies. Facilitating equitable access to working lands is essential for durable public support and for meeting Act 59's goals in ways that reflect the needs and priorities of Vermont communities.

Complementary Initiatives and Programs: This pathway builds on and coordinates with existing initiatives such as the Vermont Agriculture & Food System Plan / Farm to Plate Network, the Food Security Roadmap, the Vermont Forest Future Strategic Roadmap, the Working Lands Enterprise Initiative, and the Use Value Appraisal (Current Use) program for farms and forests. It also intersects with state and federal conservation programs (e.g., NRCS easement and cost-share programs, Clean Water funding through AAFM and DEC), regional and municipal planning that directs growth to centers, and community-based land access and technical assistance efforts.

DRAFT OBJECTIVE 2: CONSERVATION FOR COMMUNITIES (CONT.)

Actions to Promote Sustainable Working Lands

Pathway 2 Action 1: Protect Working Forests and Strengthen the Forest Economy. Keep forests as forests by confronting the economic and land-use pressures that drive forest parcelization and fragmentation. The goal is to make owning and stewarding forestland economically rewarding and compatible with ecological health, so that private forests aren't lost to development.

Related Sub-Actions

- **Invest in the forest workforce and markets.** Following the Vermont Forest Future Roadmap's guidance, improve the viability of forest-based businesses through targeted investments that expand logger and mill-worker training and apprenticeships; provide or facilitate stackable grants or low-cost financing for equipment modernization and safety; invest in critical supply-chain nodes such as regional kiln-drying capacity and trucking/logistics; support the expansion of advanced wood heat systems that create markets for sustainably sourced low-grade wood; advance market development for Vermont wood products; and stimulate greater use of wood in construction and housing to both strengthen the forest economy and help meet the state's need for lower-cost homes. *Lead Implementor(s): VHCB & ANR*
- **Increase the acreage of forests subject to long-term, sustainable land management.** Continue to provide assistance to landowners to develop sustainable forest management plans that promote active forest management where appropriate, forest health and regeneration, protection of sensitive ecosystems and rare and threatened species, and provision of forest products to markets. *Lead Implementor(s): ANR*
- **Support Succession & Landowner Education.** Increase investment in succession planning, ownership transitions, and landowner education about conservation and management opportunities so more privately held working forests stay intact, productive, and in stewardship-minded hands through generational change—including tools that help connect retiring landowners with conservation options and conservation-minded buyers or community forests. *Lead Implementor(s): VHCB & FPR*
- **Educate Local Decision-Makers on Forest Fragmentation.** Increase education and technical outreach to municipal and regional decision-makers about land-use choices that better support intact, productive forests. This will include building on existing outreach programs to offer workshops, peer learning, and plain-language tools that explain how subdivision patterns, new roads, and siting decisions affect core forest blocks, habitat connectors, and long-term forest viability. *Lead Implementor(s): ANR, VHCB, and VNRC*

DRAFT OBJECTIVE 2: CONSERVATION FOR COMMUNITIES (CONT.)

Actions to Promote Sustainable Working Lands (cont.)

Pathway 2 Action 2: Keep Vermont's Farmland Working. Expand the permanent protection of agricultural land to support the 2030 and 2050 goals, while addressing the broader factors that drive farmland loss to low-density development. This means pairing land protection and affordability tools with smart land use planning, infrastructure investments, equitable land access models, and farm viability support to keep farmland working, affordable, and accessible to current and future farmers.

Related Sub-Actions

- **Strengthen farm viability and enterprise vitality.** Consistent with the Vermont Agriculture & Food System Strategic Plan, invest in the success of farm and food businesses. Expand business planning and skills-development programs for farmers, increase funding for direct technical assistance and risk management (e.g. crop insurance or emergency funds), and build out critical local supply-chain infrastructure and coordinated marketing so producers can process products and capture more value close to home. *Lead Implementor(s): VHCB*
- **Fund farmland conservation and succession. Increase state investment in farmland conservation and long-term stewardship.** This includes supporting innovative farm transfer approaches to bridge farm succession, and ensuring funding for perpetual stewardship so that conserved farms remain actively used and affordable for future farmers. *Lead Implementor(s): VHCB*
- **Develop a statewide farmland prioritization map.** Coordinate and consult with key partners to create a data-driven map to guide conservation efforts toward the most important and at-risk agricultural lands. The map should integrate factors like primary agricultural soils, proximity to markets and processing facilities, existing farm infrastructure, water availability, climate resilience (e.g. flood risk or drought), threat of conversion or fragmentation, equity and food security considerations, and alignment with local and regional plans for compact growth. *Lead Implementor(s): VHCB*
- **Develop cross-sector market strategies that deliver conservation benefits.** Facilitate coordinated statewide strategies that strengthen demand for Vermont products and experiences. Establish a Vermont Brand and Marketing Collaborative that includes the Vermont Agency of Agriculture, Food and Markets, Vermont Outdoor Recreation Collaborative, the Vermont Department of Tourism and Marketing, and independent businesses in tourism, food, and outdoor recreation to develop a shared and coordinated communications strategy. Provide support to the Vermont Farm to Plate Network, in partnership with the Vermont Department of Tourism and Marketing and the Vermont Agency of Agriculture, Food and Markets, to host quarterly collaborative marketing summits that improve marketing skills and understanding of consumer demand and identify partnership opportunities.
- **Create new farmland affordability tools.** Develop and deploy additional tools to address the high cost of farmland and farm housing. This could include new affordability easement provisions or funds to help with constructing on-farm housing for owners and farmworkers. Building on lessons from OPAV and other affordability mechanisms, tailor next-generation tools that enable farmers to access land and necessary housing without excessive debt, keeping Vermont farms financially sustainable. *Lead Implementor(s): VHCB*

DRAFT OBJECTIVE 2: CONSERVATION FOR COMMUNITIES (CONT.)

Actions to Promote Sustainable Working Lands (cont.)

Pathway 2 Action 3: Make Working Lands Models of Ecological Management and Innovation. Increase technical and financial support to help landowners manage farms and forests in ways that make their lands more climate resilient and ecologically sustainable – and share the lessons learned to improve best practices around the state.

Related Sub-Actions

- **Enhance ecological conservation values on conserved working lands.** Support land trusts and other conservation organizations to identify conserved farms and forests that have high-priority water and wildlife values, and provide landowners with help to steward those resources, including new conservation investments, training, and technical assistance during easement monitoring visits or annual check-ins so that landowners can implement soil, water, and habitat improvements that boost ecological function while ensuring that the land remains productive. *Lead Implementor(s): VHCB*
- **Add ecological protections to older easements.** Continue to secure additional conservation agreements or amendments on conserved working lands that lack today's higher standards for resource protection, including riparian buffer requirements, wetland and floodplain protections, and/or source-water protection zones. *Lead Implementor(s): Land Trusts*

Pathway 3: Strengthen Climate Resilience

This pathway will identify conservation actions and investments to make Vermont's communities and conserved lands more resilient in the face of climate change, promoting flood resilience, habitat connectivity, improved water quality and critical resource protection. Investments will protect lands where conservation helps to leverage restoration and enhancement of degraded wetlands, floodplains and riparian habitats, as well as protecting habitats and resources that are particularly important for mitigating the ongoing threats from climate change.

Contribution toward Act 59 Vision and Goals and Equity Considerations:

Vision: This pathway supports the conservation and restoration of floodplains and river corridors which will help maintain an ecologically functional landscape that sustains biodiversity, maintains landscape connectivity and supports watershed health. It will also better protect communities and their built infrastructure and downtowns. Likewise, the permanent protection and buffering of riparian corridors and wetlands on working lands will both support rural enterprise and reduce the impacts of agricultural and silvicultural land use on these aquatic resources.

Goals: This pathway will expand the network of conserved wetlands, riparian corridors, floodplains, headwaters and upland forests that contribute towards the Act's 2030 and 2050 conservation goals. This will increase the acreage of lands protected under the ERA and BCA categories, as well as support the resilience of conserved lands in the NRMA category.

Equity Considerations: These resilience-focused investments protect all Vermonters, especially our most vulnerable neighbors, including those who depend on working lands for their livelihood and food, and all whose homes and jobs are threatened by climate change impacts, including flooding. It will be important to coordinate this work with community focused organizations and partners who work with vulnerable communities to align these investments with Vermont's goals for environmental justice. Equity also requires coordination with local, state, and federal recovery and housing efforts to support voluntary relocation and replacement housing for households in flood-prone areas, so Vermonters can move out of harm's way without losing economic ground.

Complementary Initiatives and Programs: This pathway will be coordinated with Vermont's Climate Action Plan and Resilience Implementation Strategy, the Environmental Justice Program, as well as watershed-based and community led initiatives and planning, Tactical Basin Plans and Clean Water initiatives and Vermont Emergency Management. This pathway helps these initiatives succeed by directing land conservation and restoration dollars toward the wetlands, river corridors, floodplains, headwaters, and upland forests that are most important for reducing climate risk while also supporting biodiversity, working lands, and community well-being.

DRAFT OBJECTIVE 2: CONSERVATION FOR COMMUNITIES (CONT.)

Actions to Strengthen Climate Resilience

Pathway 3 Action 1: Protect and Restore Vermont’s Natural Resilience Infrastructure. Identify, protect and restore the natural areas that safeguard Vermont’s natural and human communities from climate impacts, including wetlands, riparian corridors, floodplains, headwaters and upland forests.

Related Sub-Actions

- **Expand Floodplain and Wetland Conservation.** Increase opportunities for easements and strategic purchases of frequently flooded lands and intact river corridors along Vermont’s rivers and streams as identified by ANR, VEM and other partners with expertise in natural resilience infrastructure. *Lead Implementor(s): VHCB*
- **Integrate Restoration into Conservation Projects.** Screen new land conservation projects for opportunities to restore natural hydrology and ecosystem function (wetland, river corridor, or floodplain restoration) and identify opportunities to fund conservation efforts on properties with significant restoration potential and landowner willingness to implement resilience measures. *Lead Implementor(s): VHCB*

Pathway 3 Action 2: Support Implementation of the State’s Resilient Implementation Strategy (RIS) and Climate Action Plan. Ensure land conservation initiatives contribute to statewide climate adaptation goals and are tracked for effectiveness by implementing the following RIS actions. *Lead Implementor(s): VHCB*

Related Sub-Actions

- To accelerate the pace of high-priority land conservation, continue efforts to revise Vermont Housing and Conservation Board (VHCB) easement and coholder policies to reduce administrative burdens. Streamlining these requirements will increase the capacity of VHCB and its partners, leading to the faster acquisition of more lands critical for climate resilience. *(RIS action 14A)*
- Expand the Farm and Forest Viability Program at the Vermont Housing and Conservation Board (VHCB), offering specialized business planning and risk management assistance tailored to climate-resilient and diversified agricultural operations. *(RIS action 10C)*
- Expand the Vermont Housing and Conservation Board’s (VHCB) farmland acquisition fund, prioritizing historically underserved, new entry, and small-scale farmers. *(RIS action 10D)*
- Secure a dedicated pot of funding for the Vermont Housing and Conservation Board (VHCB) to complement and add wetland and floodplain restoration on farmland conservation projects. *(RIS action 14F)*

Implementing Partners – State Agencies and quasi-public entities, conservation organizations, landowners and working-lands partners, Federal agencies, philanthropic foundations and mission-aligned lenders.

Pathway 4: Promote Outdoor Recreation

This pathway will promote diverse outdoor recreation opportunities through strategic investments in land protection that improve recreational access across user groups and demographics, while enhancing connection with nature and protecting ecological values.

Contribution toward Act 59 Vision and Goals and Equity Considerations:

Vision: This pathway supports opportunities for recreation and appreciation of the natural world. Such opportunities will promote public health and well-being, increase community resilience and strengthen public support for land conservation, stewardship and management.

Goals: Where permanent land conservation supports State and local community investments in outdoor recreation, this pathway will support new land protection and increased ecologically informed management. New acres protected will primarily fall under the Natural Resource Management Area (NRMA) forestland category, with additions to the Biodiversity Conservation Area (BCA) category when overlay protections for sensitive habitats are part of projects.

Equity Considerations: This pathway supports the Act 59 mandate to increase equitable access to protected and conserved lands, land-based enterprises and recreational access. Investments under this pathway should be evaluated to ensure that the environmental justice benefits of recreational access are available across user groups and demographics. It must also be acknowledged that much more work is needed to broaden participation to include underrepresented communities in the planning and implementation of projects that support access.

Complementary Initiatives and Programs: This pathway will enhance the State of Vermont's current investments and commitments to the broad conservation mission implemented by the Secretary and VHCB, including conservation of agricultural lands, working forests, historic properties, recreational lands, and surface waters. Additionally, this pathway supports the goals of Move Forward Together VT (and the Statewide Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan, the Vermont Forest Action Plan, and the Forest Futures Strategic Roadmap.

DRAFT OBJECTIVE 2: CONSERVATION FOR COMMUNITIES (CONT.)

Actions to Promote Outdoor Recreation

Pathway 4 Action 1: Support Implementation of Move Forward Together Vermont (Vermont's Statewide Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan). Move Forward Together Vermont places equity and climate resilience as the common objectives across the work ahead to foster healthy and vibrant communities through outdoor recreation by focusing on three priority areas: stewardship, wellness and economic development.

Related Sub-Actions

- **Conduct Gap Analysis:** Conduct an outdoor spaces gap analysis for access to open space, recreation infrastructure, water and accessible places to identify and prioritize places where permanent conservation supports the State's outdoor recreation goals, in order to protect recreation lands under the NRMA forestland category. *Lead Implementor(s): ANR*
- **Ensure that Conservation Projects Protect and Provide Opportunities for Public Access:** Prioritize conservation projects that expand or create opportunities for public access, especially access points located near community centers, schools, and/or in communities that lack opportunities for access. *Lead Implementor(s): VHCB*
- **Support networking among conservation and recreation groups.** Identify new and increased opportunities for organizations focused on land conservation and those focused on outdoor recreation to convene, share ideas, and plan together. *Lead Implementor(s): VHCB & ANR*
- **Encourage public access on private lands.** Identify and implement strategies to address the variety of factors that contribute to landowners' decisions about providing public access to their land. *Lead Implementor(s): FPR & VTGC*

Implementing Partners: VTGC, VOREC, private owners of forestlands and agricultural lands, land trusts, conservation organizations, environmental organizations, working lands enterprises, outdoor recreation groups and businesses, Indigenous groups and representatives from historically marginalized and disadvantaged communities, watershed groups, municipalities, regional planning commissions, conservation commissions, and relevant State and federal agencies.

Pathway 5: Expand Place-Based Education and Outreach

This pathway identifies strategies and investments to expand place-based education and outreach efforts that connect residents with conserved lands by coordinating educational programs, expanding outdoor education opportunities and expanding the reach of conservation educational information.

Contribution toward Act 59 Vision and Goals and Equity Considerations:

Vision: This pathway identifies strategies and investments to expand place-based education and outreach efforts that connect residents with conserved lands by coordinating educational programs, expanding outdoor education opportunities and expanding the reach of conservation educational information.

Goals: This primary outcomes of the actions under this pathway will not directly support the quantitative goals for land conservation, but instead focus on fostering more public enjoyment of, engagement with, and appreciation for conserved lands, which will promote the shared understanding and authorizing environment needed for increased investments. It will also help build the capacity for conservation-focused stewardship and education.

Equity Considerations: This pathway recommends actions that will increase more equitable access to lands and to land-based enterprise. The actions under this pathway will create opportunities for shared planning among education stakeholders and the communities they serve.

Complementary Initiatives and Programs: Actions under this pathway will support landowners, community groups and conservation organizations by providing common understanding, and better access to data and resources, so that partners working on complementary initiatives can bring a full understanding of the benefits of land conservation to those initiatives.

DRAFT OBJECTIVE 2: CONSERVATION FOR COMMUNITIES (CONT.)

Actions to Expand Place-Based Education and Outreach

Pathway 5 Action 1: Connect Schools and Communities to Conserved Lands, Technical Assistance and Training. Identify educational institutions, community groups, and municipal partners interested in working to strengthen programs and funding that integrate land conservation with educational and community spaces, especially focusing on town forests, school lands, and partnerships with higher educational institutions.

Related Sub-Actions

- **Prioritize conservation near K-12 schools.** Work with conservation partners, as well as educational institutions, community groups, and municipal partners, to increase and simplify funding opportunities for projects that establish or enlarge town forests, parks, or natural areas adjacent to schools. *Lead Implementor(s): VHCB*
- **Support local conservation commissions and municipalities.** Work with conservation partners, educational institutions, community groups, and municipal partners, to improve technical assistance resources for municipal bodies (like conservation commissions, planning commissions, and school boards) to help them achieve local land conservation goals in local communities and adjacent to schools and other community owned or accessible infrastructure. *Lead Implementor(s): VHCB, AVCC, and ANR*
- **Launch a Conservation Careers Pathway.** Work with the Vermont State Colleges to explore the creation of a new conservation track to expand availability of trained and certified appraisers, surveyors, and paralegals in Vermont. *Lead Implementor(s): TBD*
- **Create a statewide landowner education program.** Develop and expand a state-level “train-the-trainer” initiative for community-based landowner education, using successful models like Cold Hollow to Canada’s Woodlots Toolkit. This program would develop a standardized curriculum and materials that local schools, landowner groups, conservation districts, or extension services can use. *Lead Implementor(s): TBD*
- **Scale up community naturalist and land steward training.** Increase investments in volunteer training programs that engage adults in conservation, such as Vermont Coverts (wildlife stewards), Vermont Master Naturalist, Master Gardener, and similar initiatives. *Lead Implementor(s): TBD*
- **Strengthen outdoor and environmental education for youth.** Support and broaden programs that help teachers and youth leaders engage children with nature. *Lead Implementor(s): TBD*

Pathway 5 Action 2: Enhance Outreach, Collaboration, and Information-Sharing. Create an information hub and promote events that help Vermonters learn about conservation opportunities, share best practices and lessons learned, and celebrate the importance of our natural and working lands.

Related Sub-Actions

- **Establish a one-stop “Conservation Navigation” hub.** Create an easily accessible online resource that guides landowners, community groups, and citizens to conservation programs and partners. *Lead Implementor(s): TBD*
- **Increase collaborative education events to connect landowners and communities with conservation outcomes.** Support, promote and increase public events that showcase Vermont’s working landscape and conservation work in an engaging, hands-on way. *Lead Implementor(s): TBD*

Key Partners: Land trusts and conservation organizations, educational institutions, community groups, and municipal partners.

»»»» DRAFT OBJECTIVE 3: STRENGTHEN CONSERVATION CAPACITY

This objective is focused on expanding the conservation community's ability to sustainably protect and steward land.

This plan's success is dependent on having the people, programs, funding and innovations needed to successfully implement Act 59 in years to come. This work includes strengthening the whole conservation community, including the Vermont Housing and Conservation Board, the Agency of Natural Resources, conservation organizations, municipalities, landowners, and the many public and private organizations that support community-level conservation. Phase 1 input reported concerns about underfunding and limited access to financing tools. Stakeholders requested streamlined, permanent funding mechanisms and equitable access to technical support.

Pathway 1: Increase and Optimize Funding and Financing

This pathway proposes how to make strategic investments that will address critical capacity gaps in Vermont's conservation network to advance the land protection, stewardship, and community resilience investments and innovations needed to implement Act 59. Continuing and new investments in public and nonprofit partners are needed to move high-priority projects forward as well as ensure that conserved lands can be managed over time.

Contribution toward Act 59 Vision and Goals and Equity Considerations:

Vision and Goals: This pathway identifies the funding, capacity, and collaborative structures needed to advance the conservation and long-term stewardship of lands that support biodiversity, climate resilience, working lands, and community access, and to enable progress toward Act 59's 2030 and 2050 conservation goals.

Equity Considerations: How we increase and target funding will shape who is able to participate in Act 59 implementation. Capacity building and funding investments in under-resourced geographies and organizations helps distribute conservation resources more equitably, so that smaller communities, emerging partners, and groups led by or serving historically underserved Vermonters can participate alongside established organizations and agencies.

DRAFT OBJECTIVE 3: STRENGTHEN CONSERVATION CAPACITY

Actions to Increase and Optimize Funding and Financing

Pathway 1 Action 1: Strengthen statewide infrastructure and capacity for conservation, stewardship, restoration, and enhancement. Make strategic statewide investments that enable Act 59 implementation at scale, including core state capacity, stable funding, and shared tools.

Related Sub-Actions

- **Identify and address critical capacity gaps.** Conduct a capacity analysis at statewide, regional and local level to identify capacity and funding gaps and evaluate existing and new funding mechanisms to support land conservation, stewardship, restoration and enhancement. *Lead Implementor: VHCB & ANR*
- **Increase funding at ANR for implementation of Act 59.** Strengthened, stable funding for ANR, especially the Departments of Forests, Parks & Recreation and Fish & Wildlife, is essential for long-range management planning, habitat restoration, and resilient state lands infrastructure, as well as tracking progress toward Act 59's goals.
- **Increase state investment in the VHCB conservation mission.** Additional appropriations are needed at VHCB to ensure sufficient resources can be allocated to VHCB and its partners and grantees to support Act 59 implementation. This investment should also include dedicated funding and capacity for the Land Access and Opportunity Board (LAOB) to support community-led participation in conservation planning and decision-making, and to help ensure that the benefits of conservation—access, ownership opportunities, and stewardship investments—are more equitably shared and begin to address long-standing inequities across Vermont.

Pathway 1 Action 2: Strengthen statewide infrastructure and capacity for conservation, stewardship, restoration, and enhancement. Make strategic statewide investments that enable Act 59 implementation at scale, including core state capacity, stable funding, and shared tools.

Related Sub-Actions

- **Attract Increased Support from Federal and Philanthropic Partners for Implementation of Act 59.** Based on the capacity gap analysis conducted above: Identify new and enhance existing funding and financing mechanisms to support the work of Vermont's regional, municipal and non-profit conservation network. *Lead Implementor: VHCB & ANR*
- **Maximize Efficiency.** Evaluate and improve the efficiency and coordination of Vermont's conservation delivery system by investing in efforts to update and innovate policies, guidelines, programs and to develop shared tools and data. *Lead Implementor: VHCB*
- **Build Local and Regional Conservation Organization Capacity.** Expand technical assistance for local land trusts and regional conservation organizations to support Land Trust Alliance accreditation and strengthen organizational and business practices. This will help organizations scale their work within their service areas, including work on locally specific priorities that can be difficult for statewide partners to take on consistently. *Lead Implementor: VHCB*

DRAFT OBJECTIVE 3: STRENGTHEN CONSERVATION CAPACITY

Pathway 2: Expand the Support System for Conservation in Vermont

This pathway identifies strategies and investments that will grow the support system of practitioners, natural resources management contractors, and community leaders needed to support conservation efforts into the future.

Contribution toward Act 59 Vision and Goals and Equity Considerations:

Vision and Goals: This pathway supports outcomes under the Vision and Goals by strengthening the network of practitioners, contractors, and community leaders who work with VHCB, ANR, and other partners to identify, plan, and implement conservation actions. By building this “backbone” of support, Vermont will be better able to conserve and steward lands that advance biodiversity, climate resilience, working lands, and community access.

Equity Considerations: This pathway has major implications for who holds power, resources, and voice in Vermont’s conservation system. If capacity-building, technical assistance, and workforce investments flow only to well-established organizations, it risks reinforcing existing imbalances in which larger, well-resourced institutions benefit most from public funding. To advance equity, this pathway should intentionally expand support to a wider range of conservation and community partners.

Actions to Expand the Support System for Conservation in Vermont

Pathway 2 Action 1: Strengthen technical assistance, data access, and planning support so private landowners and landowner support groups can make informed decisions that advance Act 59’s conservation, resilience, and working lands goals.

Related Sub-Actions

- **Strengthen landowner outreach and technical support systems.** Map the existing outreach and technical support system, identify geographic and topical gaps (e.g., succession, climate resilience, biodiversity planning), and highlight opportunities to better coordinate and fill those gaps. *Lead Implementor: VHCB*
- **Make technical assistance and data tools accessible to under-resourced landowners.** Ensure technical assistance, outreach, and mapping tools reach historically underserved Vermonters. This includes plain-language and multilingual materials, low-bandwidth and offline options where possible, and targeted outreach through trusted local partners so that support does not flow only to the best-resourced landowners and communities. *Lead Implementor: VHCB & ANR*

DRAFT OBJECTIVE 3: STRENGTHEN CONSERVATION CAPACITY

Actions to Expand the Support System for Conservation in Vermont (cont.)

Pathway 2 Action 2: Develop a Skilled, Diverse Conservation Workforce and Volunteer Steward Network. Build the next generation of conservation professionals and community stewards by expanding training, education, and service opportunities that reflect the diversity of Vermont's people and landscapes.

Related Sub-Actions

- **Support professional training for conservation-support professions.** Establish trainings and professional development for lawyers, surveyors, appraisers, ecologists, and foresters who support conservation and stewardship as part of their professional work. *Lead Implementor: VHCB*
- **Expand community-led volunteer stewardship programs.** Increase opportunities to train community volunteers to increase stewardship and restoration of conserved lands in local communities. *Lead Implementor: VHCB*
- **Strengthen and expand municipal conservation commissions.** Identify and pursue stable funding streams to resource Regional Planning Commissions and/or Vermont League of Cities and Towns, in coordination with AVCC and ANR, to provide technical assistance, resource-sharing, and scientific translation support to conservation commissions statewide. Help municipalities establish or reinvigorate conservation commissions under 24 V.S.A. ch. 118. Provide accessible training, onboarding materials, and peer support for commission members, and offer targeted technical assistance to help commissions carry out local inventories, stewardship projects, public outreach, and conservation-related planning support. *Lead Implementor: VHCB, ANR, AVCC, RPCs, VLCT*

DRAFT OBJECTIVE 3: STRENGTHEN CONSERVATION CAPACITY

Pathway 3: Innovate New Programs and Practices

This pathway will innovate programs and practices to efficiently increase the pace, quality and impact of conservation investments to expand Vermont's ability to meet the Act 59 goals and vision, as well as uplifting complementary initiatives.

Contribution toward Act 59 Vision and Goals and Equity Considerations:

Vision and Goals: This pathway strengthens Vermont's ability to adapt its conservation system as ecological, economic and social conditions change. By piloting and refining new funding mechanisms, decision-support tools, and partnership models, it creates a way to learn from results and update priorities and practices in response to evolving community needs. In doing so, it helps keep Act 59's vision and goals alive over time, so that our strategies for biodiversity, climate resilience, working lands, and community well-being can adapt to a changing future.

Equity Considerations: This pathway should prioritize designs that lower administrative barriers, broaden eligibility, and intentionally include under-resourced organizations and historically underserved communities in co-creating new tools and pilots. Doing so helps ensure that increased efficiency and capacity translate into more equitable access to funding, technical support, and decision-making power across Vermont's conservation landscape.

Actions to Innovate New Programs and Practices

Pathway 3 Action 1: Innovate existing and new programs and practices that accelerate and diversify land conservation.

Related Sub-Actions

- **Create simplified easement options for community partners.** Develop simplified easement for small NGOs, municipal bodies like conservation commissions, regional conservation districts and other community organizations that can be stewarded with more limited capacity when combined with education, feasibility funding, and other supports. *Lead Implementor: VHCB*
- **Standardize funding for stewardship and project development.** Evaluate and refine its internal policies to establish a consistent approach to fund conservation stewardship and project development costs at the statewide, regional and local levels. *Lead Implementor: VHCB*
- **Unlock capacity through program and policy innovation.** Explore innovations that will unlock capacity for conservation outcomes, increased funding for ANR's CWSP and Enhancement Grant programs, and new collaborations with Federal partners like USFS, USFWS and USDA. *Lead Implementor: VHCB & ANR*
- **Establish a Conservation Innovation Fund.** Create an innovation fund to pilot and evaluate new approaches that address key barriers to conservation—such as affordability, efficiency, and engaging new demographics—and scale up successful models. *Lead Implementor: VHCB*

DRAFT OBJECTIVE 3: STRENGTHEN CONSERVATION CAPACITY

Actions to Innovate New Programs and Practices (cont.)

Pathway 3 Action 2: Improve efficiency and capacity in land stewardship and administration.

Related Sub-Actions

- **Establish a VHCB Stewardship Endowment.** VHCB will establish a stewardship endowment for perpetual stewardship of conserved lands owned by the State of Vermont, municipalities and/or non-profit organizations.
- **Right-size oversight and streamline shared stewardship.** VHCB will work with municipal and NGO partners to review current stewardship and administrative requirements, identify and eliminate duplicative or low-value oversight, and design protections that are fit-for-purpose—strong enough to safeguard conserved values, but flexible and nimble enough to support timely, on-the-ground decision-making.
- **Streamline state land management planning.** ANR will complete rulemaking to streamline the Long-Range Management Plan (LRMP) process to increase the number of acres of public land guided by an LRMP—while maintaining strong public input and ecological safeguards.
- **Explore the creation of a Vermont Green Bank and whether it could further the vision and goals of Act 59,** including land acquisition and restoration and the financing of farming and agricultural projects that deliver conservation-aligned outcomes. Agricultural projects could include supporting the transition to ecologically beneficial practices by financing enabling infrastructure that removes bottlenecks in local and regional markets, such as aggregation, storage, processing, and distribution. *Lead Implementor: VHCB*