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At Session's Halfway Mark, Lawmakers Moving Promising Conservation, Energy Bills



Vermont lawmakers will return from the town meeting break this coming Tuesday, March 11 to resume their work, which will include debate on several important environmental and energy bills. Below is a rundown of VNRC's legislative priorities, and where they are likely headed when the Legislature reconvenes.

Meanwhile, you can find out what's going on at the State House and track bills any time by visiting the [legislative website](#). And if you have other questions, feel free to be in touch with VNRC.

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Forests: Current Use and Forest Fragmentation Legislation Under Discussion in Senate



Bills relating to Vermont forests are under consideration in the Vermont Senate this year. One relates to the Current Use program and the other to fragmentation of forests from development.

Last year the House passed a bill, H.329, that makes changes to the Current Use program and, among other things, increases the penalty for withdrawing and developing land. For its part, the Senate is eyeing other changes to the farm and forest property tax equity program, including capping the benefit for landowners in areas with high property values.

VNRC opposes placing a cap on landowners, and instead supports raising the development penalty as a way to strengthen the credibility of the program and bring in additional revenue to support growing enrollment. The legislation is likely headed for a House-Senate conference committee later this spring.

Another bill, S.100, would increase Act 250 oversight of development that fragments large forested areas. VNRC supports the concept of addressing forest fragmentation in Act 250, especially since Act 250 formerly reviewed the impacts of long roads. VNRC testified on ways to modify the bill so that it is not over-reaching, but lays out a process for minimizing the effects of development that reaches deep into our forests.

For more information, contact Forest and Wildlife Program Director [Jamey Fidel](#).

Energy and Climate Action: Net-Metering, Siting, and Weatherization All in Play



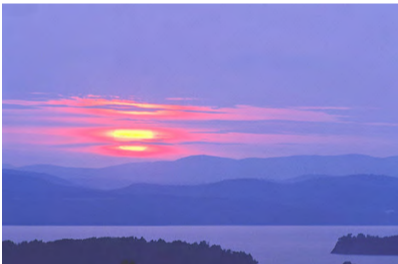
A bill that expands the amount of net-metered electricity that Vermont utilities must allow in their territories overwhelmingly passed the House several weeks ago and, last Friday, sailed through the Senate Finance Committee with solid support. Before approving it, the committee – at the request of VNRC and partner organizations – amended the House-passed version of the bill by adding a provision to make it viable to develop larger solar projects on capped landfills. Overall, the bill, H.702, helps reopen the door for all Vermont residents, businesses and farmers to go solar by participating in the popular net-metering program. The full Senate will likely vote on the measure in the near future.

Another bill in the Senate, S.201, would change the review process for developing electric generation facilities. While VNRC believes there are opportunities to improve the siting process to better balance many important interests and goals, we have concerns with the bill as written. The changes under consideration in S.201 (now also S.292) could have unintended consequences and would likely make it much harder to develop needed clean energy projects in Vermont. The bill envisions a greater role for regional planning commissions in energy facility development. While VNRC believes that an increased role for regional planning is important, regional planning commissions need additional resources to do this work. We also believe that regional plans must be accountable to and crafted to meet Vermont state energy and climate goals.

Lastly, the state's successful and already-backlogged low-income weatherization program could face serious cuts unless the Legislature fills a budget gap in the FY 2015 budget and allocates the \$12 million needed to maintain current capacity. This program helps some of the most cash-strapped Vermonters save money by saving energy — a solution that is also good for the planet. VNRC has been working closely with many diverse partners to promote a funding fix for this year and urge the Legislature to find a sustainable, sufficient, long-term funding source for low-income weatherization.

For more information, contact Energy and Climate Action Program Director [Johanna Miller](#).

Water Bills Moving Relate to Shoreland Protection, Stormwater Control, Dams



The House and Senate have both passed legislation, H.526, to help protect shoreland wildlife habitat and safeguard the water quality of Vermont's lakes and ponds. The House and Senate versions of the legislation take different approaches, so the bill is headed for a conference committee that will seek to hammer out a final bill that would then go to the governor's desk. Shoreland protection has been a priority for VNRC and we continue working hard to assure the final product is as protective as possible.

Also in the water arena is a bill, H.586, directed more specifically at cleaning up Lake Champlain. A recent version of the bill, which has been under discussion in the House Fish Wildlife and Water Resources Committee for several weeks, contained modest provisions to stem the flow of water pollution from farms as well as new fees on developed residential and commercial property to support water cleanup. The future of the bill remains uncertain. If it passes the House, it will still need to pass the full Senate.

A bill requiring the inspection of dams has also begun moving. Passed by the House Fish, Water and Wildlife committee, H.590 requires property owners with dams on their land to register, and inspect, those dams. If enacted, the bill could lead to the removal of disused dams which could improve stream flow and water quality in many of Vermont's rivers. The bill is now in the House Ways and Means Committee. It will then head to the full House, and then move to the Senate for consideration.

For more information, contact Water Program Director [Kim Greenwood](#).

Photo credit: Wayne Fawbush

Sustainable Communities: Bill to Boost Downtowns, Stem Sprawl, Progresses in House



On the land use front, legislation is in play that would help reinforce well-planned development in good locations – the compact, often historic centers already served by services like water, sewer and sidewalks. One bill would add incentives for developing in designated downtowns while also stemming sprawl development outside of those areas. That bill, H.823, is likely to be approved by the House Natural Resources and Energy Committee next week. If it passes the House, it would then move to the Senate for consideration.

VNRC is also paying close attention to another bill, currently in the House Agriculture Committee, that could change the way primary agricultural soils are considered under Act 250.

In short, VNRC supports preserving as much agricultural soil as is practical while at the same time steering growth into the best locations.

VNRC is also working against poorly planned development, and has been opposing a bill that would promote industrial parks with additional funding, potentially at the expense of our proven downtown programs.

For more information, contact Sustainable Communities Program Director [Kate McCarthy](#).

Above photo: VNRC's Sustainable Communities Program Director Kate McCarthy testifies recently before the House Agriculture Committee.

Special Note: Lauren Hierl, VCV Political Director, Hits the Ground Running



The newly-hired political director for Vermont Conservation Voters, Lauren Hierl, started work this week. Lauren is coordinating the political work of VCV including tracking legislation, scoring lawmakers on votes, and preparing scorecards to help Vermont voters make informed decisions at election time based on lawmakers' environmental track records.

Lauren most recently served as the Environmental Health Advocate at VPIRG. She has a BA from Dartmouth College and two masters degrees from Duke University: one in public policy and one in environmental management.

In 2013, VCV and VNRC entered into a strategic partnership. They remain separate entities and pursue separate, though complementary, missions. VCV and VNRC have overlapping boards of directors. VCV is housed at the VNRC offices at 9 Bailey Avenue, Montpelier.

Contact Lauren at lhierl@vermontconservationvoters.org or 802-223-2328 x122.