



Special Report on the Legislature



Vermont lawmakers have wasted no time diving into the substance of legislation this year, and after last week's optimistic speech from Gov. Shumlin hailing Vermont's bounceback from Tropical Storm Irene and an improving economy, the Legislature has gotten off to a swift and largely upbeat start in 2012. From the crack of the opening gavel, VNRC was right in the thick of things and will, as usual, have a strong presence in the building until adjournment in the spring.

Lots of new energy and environmental legislation has been put on the table for consideration this year and the House and Senate natural resources and energy committees have begun setting priorities for action.

Below is a rundown of VNRC's legislative priorities this year.

Energy Bills on the Table

The House Natural Resources and Energy Committee has begun discussing a bill – [H.468](#) – to require that electric utilities get a certain percentage of their energy from renewable sources. Such a policy is known as a renewable portfolio standard, or RPS, and, if done right, could continue to move Vermont toward using even more renewable energy to generate electricity. VNRC is analyzing the details of an RPS and will be tracking and testifying on the bill. For more background on an RPS, check out an October 2011 report of the Public Service Board on a potential Vermont RPS [here](#).

Also, the Legislature is taking up a bill – [H.475](#) – that will make targeted changes to Vermont's net metering statute to make it easier and more viable for Vermonters to invest in renewables, primarily solar energy.

While these efforts are aimed largely at encouraging more renewable electricity, in order to meet the goal of the recently-released [Vermont Comprehensive Energy Plan](#) that Vermont get 90 percent of all of its energy from renewable sources by 2050, policymakers will have to take a broader view, and start soon. Part of that effort will require more aggressive policy on home heating fuel conservation, an important issue for VNRC. VNRC, with our focus on conservation and efficiency, forest policy, and smart land use – including efficient transportation policy – is poised to help Vermont meet this broader goal.

Lastly, click [here](#) for a short video snapshot of what is happening on energy issues at the State House from House Natural Resources and Energy Committee chair Tony Klein.



Land Use and the Working Landscape

VNRC and many other partner organizations will be working this year for policies to improve the viability of Vermont's working landscape.

For instance, VNRC supports a bill passed by the House last year, – [H.237](#) – to build in long-term stability to the Current Use program by increasing the penalty for pulling land out of the program and developing it. For years VNRC has been promoting strengthening the penalty to limit the ability of landowners to take advantage of the program by parking land in the program for a short duration. VNRC has been working with a broad group of stakeholders in the Current Use Tax Coalition to develop a consensus approach to the bill and other improvements to Current Use. We will be encouraging the Senate to take action on the bill this year and to send it to the Governor for his support.

Legislators are also looking at ways to improve the economic viability of the working landscape, in part by boosting the infrastructure necessary for a viable land-based economy. VNRC is working with other groups, including the Vermont Council on Rural Development, to advance legislation embodied in a bill – [S.246](#) – "An act relating to preserving Vermont's working landscape." This bill recognizes that Vermont is currently positioned to continue to expand its innovative work in local food production and value added processing. It puts forth a proposal for strategic investment in infrastructure, but also in support services that help growers and processors access funding and grow their businesses. The bill lays the groundwork for helping Vermont fully realize its potential in this area.



Citizen Participation: Two Initiatives

VNRC supports two legislative initiatives this year focused on the ability of Vermont citizens to have their voices heard on environmental matters. The first – [H.258](#) – passed the House last year and gives citizens the ability to comment on proposed Agency of Natural Resources and Natural Resources Board enforcement settlements before they're finalized. VNRC hopes the Senate will now pass the legislation and send it to Gov. Shumlin for his signature.

The second measure would more broadly improve the environmental permitting process so that it's more accessible to citizens. In particular, VNRC will be pushing for legislative action to make the environmental appeals process easier, faster, and less expensive for all participants, including interested citizens. The Natural Resources Board recently laid out a menu of options for improving the process – while not weakening Vermont's appropriately solid environmental standards – and VNRC is studying the options and will be promoting those that help improve the permitting process.



Flooding and Public Safety

VNRC strongly agrees with the long-term river management approach of the Agency of Natural Resources, and we oppose loosening current rules related to dredging gravel out of Vermont's rivers.

For the past decade or more, Vermont's Agency of Natural Resources has used science in developing policy to manage our rivers, generally allowing rivers to shift and settle into a state of equilibrium over time, and resisting the temptation to "tame" them by armoring, berming and channelizing them.

But when Tropical Storm Irene swept across Vermont, the debate over river management was reignited. VNRC, as well as partners including the Conservation Law Foundation, Trout Unlimited, Lake Champlain International, Vermonters for a Clean Environment, and many active local watershed groups are working to assure that Vermont sticks with a science-based approach as this will reduce the threat of disastrous damage to public and private property. Proposed legislation ([H.466](#) in the House and [S.165](#) in the Senate) offers a very good start in confirming and clarifying Vermont's policy on river management. VNRC intends to be very active in post-Irene legislation related to our rivers.



Additional Bills

Additional bills VNRC will strongly support this session include:

- A ban on hydrofracking for natural gas ([H.464](#))
- Requirements for disclosing energy efficiency performance of buildings ([S.143](#))
- Requirements for testing of potable water wells. ([S.183](#))

If you have any questions about any of these issues, or would like to make your voice heard in the Legislature or elsewhere, please do not hesitate to be in touch with VNRC. Please contact Jake Brown at 223-2328 or at jbrown@vnrc.org.

Thanks for all you do!

The VNRC Team

Am I a VNRC member? Good question. Receiving this email does not necessarily mean you are a supporting-member, but now is a great time to become a member and join over 5,000 others dedicated to moving Vermont communities towards a healthy environmental and economic future. Your [donation](#) means a lot to us--and for Vermont!