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VNRC 2017 Legislative Preview

Dear Friend,

Yesterday, Vermont lawmakers rolled into Montpelier to kick off the 2017-2018 biennium. Committee makeup and assignments were announced, Governor Shumlin gave his farewell address, and VNRC staff rolled up our sleeves for the months ahead.

With the U.S. on the cusp of swearing in a climate-denying President – who has nominated several anti-environment, climate science skeptics to key administrative positions – the onus to act on pressing environmental issues falls to the states. At VNRC, we're taking this responsibility to heart. We will need your help in calling on state lawmakers to rise to the task of addressing our shared priorities in the coming year.

Read on for a preview of some of VNRC's priorities this year...

Sustainable Communities



In Vermont, our sustained investment in downtowns, working lands, and affordable housing have been essential for supporting vital communities, healthy forests, and productive farms – the things we all love about Vermont. We'll continue our work to maintain and advance the program that make Vermont Vermont. This year, we will be advocating for:

- fully funding the Vermont Housing and Conservation Fund that balances investments in housing and land conservation;
- continued funding for the Working Lands Enterprise Fund, which supports small farm and forest businesses; and
- expanding downtown tax credits, which make it possible to reuse historic buildings and support small businesses in our downtowns.

These are proven programs that leverage public and private dollars while improving people's lives and the quality of Vermont's environment. We'll work this legislative session to keep these programs from being weakened.

Forest and Wildlife

Prioritizing forest health has finally gained traction as an issue vital to Vermont's economic and ecological well-being. As a result of legislation



passed last year, a number of reports have been pushed forward to address problems facing our forests, wildlife and forest-based economy. In light of VNRC's decades-long work to address forest fragmentation and recent legislative and public traction, this year VNRC will continue to advocate for:

- Implementing recommendations from multiple legislative study reports that call for ways to keep forests intact, reduce forest fragmentation, and help forest landowners hold onto their forests over multiple generations;
- successful implementation of better land use planning to reduce forest fragmentation at the town and regional level; and
- continuing to make the link of the role that forests play as a solution to maintaining water quality in the state.

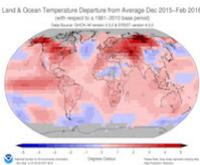
Water



The good news for Vermont's waters is that they've finally received the attention they deserve. The bad news is the reason for the attention: the health and safety of our waters from Burlington to Bennington is compromised. The expensive damage control getting underway must continue, with measures to address issues from phosphorous pollution to toxic chemical contamination, and preventative solutions to keep our waters clean and safe for future generations. VNRC will be advocating for

- Implementing recommendations from the toxics legislative study committee that call for stronger disclosure and reporting around chemical use, holding polluters accountable when toxic chemicals are released into our food and water supplies, and better tools for keeping them out of consumer products;
- ensuring efforts to clean up Lake Champlain and other state waters will have the funding they need to succeed. Additionally, success will also depend on addressing key issues like preventing more pollution from farm field drains, known as tile drains, that funnel phosphorous and other nutrients directly into our streams, rivers and lakes, and shifting the state's agricultural policy away from large, conventional dairy operations toward regenerative and organic farming; and
- advancing measures to improve the health of our rivers and safety of unmaintained dams across the state (there are over 1,000 known dams in Vermont) through mandatory dam safety inspections.

Energy and Climate Action



Now, more than ever, states must lead on climate action and a clean energy economy. Vermont has taken important steps to help Vermonters save energy, cut costs and transition to more efficient, renewable solutions. This has resulted in the state having the second lowest electric rates in New England and has spurred a fast growing clean energy job sector. But there is far more to do. This year, VNRC will be:

- Working to ensure our commitment to clean energy and climate action remains strong by making the state's widely supported goals of 90 percent renewable energy by 2050 official in statute;
- exploring opportunities to ensure that low-income Vermonters can participate in our clean energy transition, including providing them more opportunities to invest in solar;
- pushing back on any effort to undermine our commitment to renewable energy, including attempts to ban or put a moratorium on the development of wind energy in the state; and
- continuing to explore policies that will grow a clean energy economy and curb our reliance on imported fossil fuels even faster, including advancing carbon pricing as a pivotal part of broader tax reform.



Since 1970, Act 250, the state's cornerstone land use and development law has reviewed projects of a certain scale to make sure that they don't harm water, air, wildlife, and agricultural resources. A lot has changed in the nearly 50 years since its passage, but it remains an important environmental and community safeguard in Vermont.

This year, VNRC will be advocating for improvements to Act 250, including addressing forest fragmentation, and fighting piecemeal efforts to weaken the law through exemptions. In particular, we'll work to ensure the law continues to reduce sprawl with the 2014 addition of Criterion 9L, an update VNRC played a key role in advancing. In addition, we will actively oppose any effort to "reform" Act 250 – or any environmental permitting process – a way that relaxes basic environmental safeguards or limits the ability of citizens and communities to participate in those processes.

It is going to be a busy year, and we are optimistic about what we can achieve in Vermont if we work together. Thanks as always for your support!

Vermont Natural Resources Council

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