

Vermont Environmental Report



Advocacy in Action



Ensuring a Strong VNRC Future

Since 1963, VNRC has brought unwavering advocacy, solid research, and strong relationships with citizens, the business community and legislators to our work. Without VNRC, Vermont would be a very different place. And the work we are doing today—such as building and motivating town energy committees, protecting our groundwater, and helping to conserve large tracts of forestland—will leave an incredible legacy for future generations.

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"The notion of leaving a piece of our "estate" to VNRC, an institution we love and believe in, makes us glad that after we're gone, our work promoting planetary sanity and sustainability in some way carries on."

– Don and Allison Hooper, Sharon

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Through research, education, collaboration and advocacy, VNRC protects and enhances Vermont's natural environments, vibrant communities, productive working landscapes, rural character and unique sense of place, and prepares the state for future challenges and opportunities.

VNRC is the Vermont affiliate of the National Wildlife Federation.

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Defining Advocacy

By Brian Shupe



As a result of last year's alarming presidential election — and recent actions by the new administration — we are likely on the threshold of losing many of the environmental safeguards — and democratic values — that we have worked so hard for decades to establish. The cost to our environment and economy is still unknown but potentially staggering.

In Vermont, we have also undergone a change in administration and legislative leadership, but fortunately the pendulum did not swing nearly as far to the extreme as it did at the federal level. That said, our work to steward Vermont's natural heritage and distinctive sense of place — and address the global threats to our state and planet — will be more challenging in the coming years. VNRC will work even harder to address these challenges through our unique form of advocacy that combines research, litigation, education, technical assistance, coalition building, and advancing responsible public policy.

This issue of the *Vermont Environmental Report* explores the many ways that we define advocacy. Obviously, it means that we promote policies, programs, and personal actions that lead to environmental and community health and well-being. But advocacy often relies on different approaches, depending on the situation.

VNRC is well known in the State House, where our program directors are widely regarded as experts in their fields who have researched the issues and can substantively support our positions. In that respect, research and science is as much a part of our advocacy as the lobbying that we do in Montpelier.

Yet not all decisions are made in Montpelier. In Vermont, many decisions regarding land use and development, forest and farmland conservation, the protection of groundwater and rivers and streams, energy efficiency and conservation are made at the municipal level.

This reliance on local decision-making is why VNRC works directly with communities — i.e. supporting energy committees or providing technical assistance to planning and conservation commissions. This work is another form of advocacy.

And it's not only the enactment of legislation that creates policy, but often it's the implementation of that legislation through rule making and administrative action that requires our attention. Serving as a watchdog to ensure that government follows the law, and supports established policy with adequate resources, is another form of advocacy that is often conducted outside of the limelight.

And, sometimes, government doesn't follow the law, or decisions are made as part of a regulatory review process that may result in bad consequences for the environment or a local community. In these situations, we stand ready to use the legal process to advocate for our goals.

Finally, we can't do our work without the support of our members and a well-informed public. In this regard, education and engagement are a form of advocacy. There is strength in numbers, and working with our many partners through coalitions and partnerships is another means to achieving our goals.

The stakes have never been higher than they are now, and advocacy, in its many forms, has never been more important.



Advocacy in Action

VNRC 'Networks' to Effect Change

By Will Lindner

Overarching environmental threats require overarching solutions – remedies that inevitably affect large numbers of people. This is true whether the threats are existential (climate change); aesthetic (a swarm of billboards, which Vermont banned in 1968); or a combination of these, like sprawl, which devours rural land and euthanizes downtowns.

In Vermont, more than most places, formulating these overarching solutions is a communal endeavor. It lives in the activism of citizens in their hometowns and in the committee rooms of the citizen legislature in Montpelier. So it is in these settings that the VNRC advocates for a healthy environment and the vitality of the state's small communities.

Just as VNRC itself began, in 1963, as a coalition of citizens who perceived a threat to Vermont's land and water resources by unplanned development, the organization continues to bring people together to share the added power of community.

"It is the grand tradition of VNRC," says Don Hooper, of Brookfield, who retired in last June after 17 years as the Northeast Regional Representative for the National Wildlife Federation. Hooper, who has also served in the Legislature (1985-1992) and was a VNRC staff member from 1979 to 1984, cites early examples of grassroots-level advocacy.

"We put together the Current Use Tax Coalition," he recalls, "which had a big umbrella of partner organizations, from snowmobilers to the Farm Bureau." Its purpose was to bring Vermonters into the conversation about strategies for keeping farm and forestland affordable without resorting to development. Surveying more recent organizing and empowerment endeavors by VNRC, Hooper says, "I think they've gotten better and better

over the years." (Hooper acted on his admiration when he joined VNRC's Board of Directors in the fall of 2016.)

VNRC's Executive Director Brian Shupe expressed his commitment to citizen-based advocacy, saying, "There needs to be as many voices as possible engaged in decisions regarding environmental, land use, and energy policy. You need to empower the people who are going to be affected by those decisions."

Michael Snyder, Vermont's Commissioner of Forests, Parks, & Recreation, adds that an abundance of voices and viewpoints, when organized into an informed and cohesive advocacy group, contributes to better, more effective policy decisions. He points to the Forest Roundtable, founded by VNRC in 2006. The Roundtable convenes quarterly, and Snyder – first as a professional forester and since 2010 as commissioner – has rarely missed a meeting.

"VNRC has played a significant and helpful role in bringing people together with a diversity of interests — and somewhat conflicting interests," he emphasizes — "in Vermont's forests. You have landowners, conservation organizations, and some representation of the forest-products industry; people who want to leave the forests alone, and people who want to use the forests to maximize their economic potential, plus a wide contingent

in the middle. The Roundtable provides a place and a means for us to understand each other and find commonality."

This collaboration of interests, he explains, results in "work product" – articulated policy positions – that are well-vetted and better supported by those they will affect. "That's of real help to policy makers at the state level, like myself."

Of tremendous importance to him, personally, Snyder adds, is that the Forest Roundtable has promoted "a sort of cultural codification that forests matter."

In 2007 the Roundtable



Michael Snyder, Commissioner of the Department of Forests, Parks and Recreation at the Forest Roundtable.

published a groundbreaking report on parcelization and forest fragmentation, which spurred attention to these issues within state and local governments. On its 10-year anniversary, the Roundtable recently reported on its efforts. Issues included: improving the Use Value Appraisal (“current use”) Program to include Ecologically Significant Treatment Areas exempt from forest management requirements; strengthening the penalty for withdrawing land from current use; advocating for comprehensive legislation to promote working forests and provide technical assistance to landowners planning their long-

term management; and adding a role for local and regional planning groups in maintaining intact forest blocks and wildlife-connectivity areas.

Thus, it was a victory that several of these reforms were included in H.857, which was signed into law last year. VNRC’s Forests and Wildlife Program Director Jamey Fidel calls it “the most comprehensive package of legislation aimed at protecting and supporting Vermont’s forests in twenty years.”

Bringing Vermonters together from around the state like this, over shared concerns, is one level of citizen-based advocacy.

Creating a Cultural Shift

Landowner, Professional Trainings Raise Awareness of Forest Fragmentation

Ultimately, the individual decisions that Vermont landowners make will be a determining factor about whether forest parcelization – the division of forests into more, and generally smaller, ownership blocks – leads to full-blown fragmentation. Fragmentation, the physical breaking up of forests from land development, chips away at the ecological function of forests, and undercuts their economic value as well.

That’s why Jamey Fidel, VNRC’s Forest and Wildlife Program Director, and Kate McCarthy, Sustainable Communities Program Director, devote substantial time and energy to outreach – connecting with forestland owners and educating them about fragmentation and steps they can take to prevent it. They also spread the message by providing trainings for other professionals, like Realtors®, foresters, and engineers, who interact with clients who are forestland owners.

For VNRC, it’s another form of advocacy: empowering landowners and their advisors to accomplish the stewardship goals that are both emotionally and economically important to them – and, simultaneously, hearing about the issues that are stumbling blocks for people who want their land to remain productive and safeguarded for future generations.

“Several years ago we teamed up with partners and held a summit for 100 landowners at the Lake Morey Inn, to talk about different strategies that enable families to own forestland and keep it intact over multiple generations,” says Fidel.

Taxes and family dynamics are two of many factors that frequently lead to the sale or division of these assets. At the summit (titled “Planning a Legacy for Your Woodlands”), speakers addressed a range of options, such as conserving land through easements, forming limited liability corporations to benefit from special tax provisions, and creating cooperatives with other landowners.

“We also discussed how to have conversations with family members about inheritance, a topic that can be very



Realtors training in Williston, 2015. Kate McCarthy and Jens Hilke, Conservation Planning Biologist, Vermont Department of Fish and Wildlife

complicated and uncomfortable for some families to talk about,” says Fidel.

Foresters and engineers can spot the trends for themselves, says Kate McCarthy. “They see what’s happening with subdivisions and parcelization. But we give the numbers — real data — to quantify it. And both these groups can be involved with promoting estate planning for their clients. “There’s frequently an assumption that you’re supposed to just subdivide and spread it among your children. That makes parcelization worse.”

Realtors® can have a positive impact too, educating buyers about fragmentation and how they can live on their land without adding to the problem. Helen Hossley, Education Director for the Vermont Realtors® Association, attended a four-hour training in Lyndonville that was coordinated by VNRC – one of four held around the state, following others in previous years.

“The class was a wonderful, well-put-together presentation,” says Hossley. “The point was to bring awareness, so that people see the landscape differently and how it fits into the community.”

Real estate is not a static profession, she explains.

“I’ve done a whole curriculum around green, high-efficiency homes, because that’s where the market is heading in Vermont and we want to help our members become proficient in selling these homes. There’s a lot of federal money being pumped into solar panels, which we see very clearly here.”

The task for VNRC is to encourage another green trend in the housing market, the buying, and selling of intact forest property.

“It’s about changing the culture of a community, or the mindset,” Hossley observes.

A big challenge. A big problem. And a big goal for VNRC.

Find information and resources from the summit online at www.vnrc.org/landownersummit/



Energy and Climate Action Program Director Johanna Miller (center) hosts Vermont Olympians (from left to right) Hannah Dreissigacker, Susan Dunklee, Ida Sargent, and Liz Stephen at an event highlighting the threats posed by climate change to Vermont's iconic winter industries.

Even more “grassroots,” however, is supporting people who are contending with the intrusions, in their hometowns and villages, of corporate interests and developers with overwhelming resources. This was the experience of Citizens for a Greater Bennington (CGB) during an eight-year dispute over a planned expansion of the local Wal-Mart, which many community members viewed as a threat to water quality and the survival of downtown businesses.

Meg Campbell helped organize the citizens group. “VNRC was with us all the way,” she says, “as was Preservation Trust of Vermont,” a frequent partner with VNRC.

CGB was initially denied party status by the district environmental commission in the Act 250 review process. VNRC represented the group in an appeal that went to the Environmental Division of the Vermont Superior Court, where that denial was overturned.

“It meant that citizens groups fighting all kinds of other battles in the state could be granted party status even if they’re not neighboring landowners,” Campbell explains. “It doesn’t have the splash of a full ‘Stop Wal-Mart,’ but when you think about the big picture it was a huge victory.”

Ultimately, CGB did not prevail in the contest over Wal-Mart’s expansion. But with VNRC’s continued assistance, the group obtained a \$200,000 settlement with the developer in 2013 that seeded two funds – one to support economic development in Bennington’s traditional commercial district, and another for protection of water resources. Both programs are underway and producing results. Says Campbell, “We couldn’t have done this without VNRC.”

Bridge to the Legislature

The Bennington experience – VNRC tangibly assisting Vermonters dealing with very local causes and concerns – is replicated in communities all over the state: in the Mad River

Valley, where VNRC assisted communities with translating an ecological inventory into specific plan policies; in Enosburg, where the town sought advice about strengthening its conservation district in the zoning bylaw to safeguard wildlife connectivity. With the Forest Roundtable, VECAN (the Vermont Energy and Climate Action Network, a statewide coalition of town energy committees coordinated by Energy and Climate Action Program Director Johanna Miller), and other organizations, VNRC serves as a conduit, bearing informed citizen input – and its own well-researched positions – to the lawmakers who create policy.

“Our presence in the State House enables us to represent our members and the big-picture perspective on environmental issues, which is informed by the work we do locally,” says Kate McCarthy, VNRC’s Sustainable Communities Program Director. “It’s a responsibility that all of us take very seriously.”

Jon Groveman, who returned to VNRC last spring from a hitch in state government, says, “I saw firsthand VNRC’s influence. If the Legislature or the Agency of Natural Resources is considering a bill or a policy direction, they always want VNRC’s perspective. I’m not saying it wins the day all the time, but a key part of the equation for policy makers is ‘where is VNRC on this?’ ”

“All of the environmental groups active in Vermont are vital, and we have strong relationships with them,” he notes. “But we have a unique place in state policy deliberations because of our longstanding ties to Vermont’s communities.”

In the Weeds

Don Hooper calls VNRC’s staff members, and the organization itself, “wonky.”

“It’s one of VNRC’s strong suits,” he says, citing the importance of generating and disseminating technical information to members and communities. Recalling his days

Making The Case

VNRC's Legal Staff and Resources Carry the Fight Where It's Needed

We pursue our mission for a healthy environment and strong, intact communities through different pathways,” says VNRC’s Executive Director, Brian Shupe, “and a very important one is legal advocacy. In a number of cases we’ve represented our own organization and obtained precedent-setting victories, in state courts, before district commissions in the Act 250 process, before the Vermont Public Service Board (PSB), and elsewhere. We’ve also represented landowners, citizens’ groups, or other environmental groups with an advocacy need.”

In the 1990s, VNRC was in the forefront of one of the most important environmental cases of the day – Wal-Mart’s original plan to build a large store outside St. Albans – which was finally approved by the Vermont Supreme Court, but not without a decade-long fight. Along the way, VNRC continuously reinforced the principle that Act 250 should protect the economic viability of existing communities. Later, VNRC represented the Connecticut River Watershed Council when the aging Vermont Yankee nuclear plant sought state re-licensing. The organizations poked holes in VY’s models and provided evidence about the harmful effects upon fish species of discharging water that had been warmed in the plant’s cooling process.

In recent years, VNRC has achieved notable victories in areas central to its environmental mission: forest health, addressing climate change, protecting water-quality, and safeguarding communities from sprawl. In 2014, the PSB concluded two years of hearings by denying a Certificate of Public Good for a proposed wood-biomass power station in North Springfield that would have burned 450,000 tons of woodchips.

General Counsel Jamey Fidel represented VNRC and the National Wildlife Federation. The Applicant suggested the power station would be carbon neutral, but through expert testimony, Fidel demonstrated that the expected greenhouse gas emissions of the plant (448,714 tons of CO₂ per year), in tandem with the project’s low level of thermal efficiency, could not support such a conclusion.

Despite Vermont’s aggressive pursuit of renewable energy sources – a category that usually includes biomass – the PSB denied the application, based in part because the project would not comply with the state’s renewable energy goals of reducing climate change and displacing greenhouse gas emissions.

“That was a precedent setting decision,” notes Fidel. “It is significant because a future biomass electricity generating plant will now need to consider the greenhouse gas impacts of a proposed project and design it with a high enough level of thermal efficiency to offset negative impacts.”

Another recent victory came in VNRC’s appeal to the Environmental Court of stormwater discharge permits granted by the state Department of Environmental Conservation to Jay Peak Resort. VNRC was represented by the Vermont Law School’s Environmental and Natural Resources Law Clinic.

“Our concern was that these three waterways (the Jay

Branch and two tributaries) were already impaired from sediment and unable to meet minimum state water quality standards for aquatic wildlife,” says Fidel.

The parties reached a settlement in February, 2015. It reinstated the discharge permit, with requirements that the resort “offset” any additional sediment with decreases elsewhere – prohibiting any net increase in sediment loading – and made future construction plans contingent upon an aggressive schedule for bringing the streams into compliance with Vermont’s standards. It’s a model VNRC believes could be replicated elsewhere in the state.

An issue where VNRC engaged with total commitment to protect a community from bloated, inappropriate development, and prime farmland from loss and despoliation, was the application by developer Jesse Sammis for an Act 250 permit to build a mixed-use “Green Mountain Center” on 172 acres beside the Interstate 89 exit at Randolph.

“This thing was bigger than Taft Corners in Williston,” says David Hurwitz, a leader of the citizen group Exit 4 Open Space. “But we’re a town of only 4,800 people, with a tiny downtown.”

At the outset, the citizens felt overmatched, almost defenseless, he says. But VNRC reached out to the nascent citizens group, Hurwitz says, expressing gratitude particularly to Sustainable Communities Program Director Kate McCarthy and Executive Director Brian Shupe.

“They came to Randolph to meet with us,” he says. “We knew there was an Act 250 hearing coming up, and at most we felt we would go and express our concerns and that would be it. But they provided information about how we could play a more active role. For us, it was a huge learning process. The work they did, and the support they gave us, was incredible.”

VNRC, along with the Conservation Law Foundation, helped Exit 4 Open Space become a powerful voice for citizens’ concerns. Together, CLF and VNC obtained party status, and PTV brought their long-standing expertise in the preservation of downtowns and working lands. Hurwitz credits Brian Shupe for a masterful presentation to the District 3 Environmental Commission.

“Brian’s background is in planning,” he says. “He gave a Power Point presentation scrutinizing every part of the proposal, based on (the developer’s) models, having to do with utilization of the land, the parking lots, the buildings, effectively tearing it apart.”

Over the course of four hearings, Hurwitz felt that the momentum shifted, and he was in fact disappointed when Sammis withdrew his application before the commission formally denied it (as Hurwitz believed it would). The prospect lingers that Sammis could return with a modified concept.

Shupe doubts that will happen, but says VNRC will be ready if it does. “Legal advocacy,” he says, “is an arrow in our quiver, and we’ve used it to achieve a lot of good results.”

on staff in the early '80s, he says, "We produced two handbooks for landowners and homeowners that told them how to upgrade their septic systems and what that would do for water quality."

The organization is still at it. A recent example is the 2014 "Guide" composed by Kate McCarthy and Jamey Fidel, providing detailed strategies for communities focusing on forest and wildlife concerns.

Peter Gregory is executive director of the Two Rivers-Ottawaquechee Regional Commission (TRORC), which is based in Woodstock and works with 30 member-towns.

"VNRC has done a lot of sustainable development, sprawl-related research that's been helpful to us," he says. "And, informally, they've reviewed our regional plan and helped us evaluate how much our plan meets state law."

Water quality is another area of economic and public health importance in the TRORC region.

"VNRC has always had a very strong staff in the water quality side of the organization," says Gregory, "including the legal aspects of water quality standards. That's not only helped us, but has been very helpful for legislators understanding those issues."

This kind of "wonkiness" (in Hooper's words) is an important part of VNRC's repertoire. Sustainable Communities Director McCarthy provides another example.

"The Town of Monkton called me a couple years ago and said, 'We're getting ready to update our town plan and we're interested in learning what we can do to incorporate ideas related to resilience, and big-picture issues like climate change and how it's affecting our landscape.' It was great!"

Changes across a town's topography can happen so gradually that residents don't notice them or perceive their importance. A fresh set of eyes, and the broader context provided by a planning professional, led to a few "Aha!" moments.

"It was a way to get the commission members thinking about the same topics, so they can have a conversation about what they're creating with their land use policies," McCarthy explains.

Actually, conversations on climate change, energy conservation, and transitioning to a renewable energy norm, are taking place in more than 100 Vermont communities. VECAN, coordinated in-house by Johanna Miller and an AmeriCorps



Policy and Water Program Director Jon Groveman and Vermont Conservation Voters Political Director Lauren Hierl providing testimony to legislators on ways to strengthen protections for Vermonters against toxic chemical exposure.



Clean Water Day, March, 2016. (Left to right: Brian Shupe, former VNRC Water Program Director Kim Greenwood, and Representative David Deen, Chair of the House Committee on Fish, Wildlife and Water Resources)

member, knits these town energy committees together so they can learn from each other and strengthen their collective influence.

"These are really ambitious, forward thinking people who are rolling up their sleeves and working on all kinds of important projects to decrease our reliance on fossil fuels," Miller says. "I think they're empowering themselves, but my goal is to make them aware of programs they can access and partners that can help them get projects done."

Fran Putnam spearheaded the creation of the Weybridge Energy Committee, in Addison County, in 2011. She and her husband, Spencer – both longtime VNRC members – had built a net zero-energy home in 2008, "and that spurred me to thinking," says Fran, "What else could we do? Our town didn't have an energy committee, so I decided I'd better go out and do it myself. I had read the literature on energy committees, and I called Johanna. She's my go-to person at VNRC."

Guided by VNRC, the Weybridge committee tapped into funding from Efficiency Vermont and weatherized nearly 6 percent of the homes in their small community.

"That gave us credibility," says Fran – enough to undertake the challenge of reducing transportation-related energy consumption, a hard nut to crack in rural towns. Buoyed by input from other VECAN communities and the transportation policy expertise of Weybridge resident Nadine Barnicle, the group has crafted an approach for studying and, they hope, remedying the overuse of the single occupancy vehicle. With Miller's help they secured a \$5,000 grant for their pilot project from the New England Grassroots Environment Fund.

"Another thing VNRC and VECAN have been really good at," Fran adds, "is giving me, personally, an opportunity to be an advocate, to speak at conferences and do workshops. I'm able to reach a wider audience, and that amplifies what we can do as a small local energy committee."

Practically everything in Vermont is small – except for the ambitions of its citizens to live in a healthy ecosystem that functions according to the laws of nature and is encumbered as little as possible by the foibles of its human inhabitants. VNRC's founding and continuing mission is to bolster their commitment and add strength to their voices. 🌱

Welcome to New VNRC Board, Farewell to Departing Members

VNRC is pleased to welcome new Board of Directors—Betsy Chodorkoff of Marshfield, Chad Farrell of South Burlington, and Don Hooper of Brookfield, who are replacing outgoing members Susie Atwood of East Montpelier, Eric Zencey and Peter Sterling of Montpelier. “VNRC owes a debt of gratitude to Susie, Eric, and Peter whose work on the board and support of the organization over the years has helped us achieve notable victories, as well as kept us running smoothly as an organization,” said Brian Shupe, VNRC executive director. “While we’ll miss Susie, Eric, and Peter, we are looking forward to working with Betsy, Chad and Don, who bring decades of diverse expertise to the board.”

VNRC AmeriCorps Member Hitting Her Stride

Since joining VNRC and VECAN as the AmeriCorps Community Energy and Climate Action Coordinator, Katie Emerson has been hard at work helping organize a successful VECAN conference, providing technical assistance to town energy committees, and assisting in updating the VECAN website to better serve members. Previously, Emerson served on the Hinesburg Energy Committee and, most recently, interned with the Conservation Law Foundation. She holds a Masters of Environmental Law from Vermont Law School and a B.A. in Environmental Studies from Green Mountain College. “It’s great to have Katie on the team,” said Johanna Miller, VNRC energy and climate action program director.

The VECAN AmeriCorps position is made possible through the Vermont Housing and Conservation Board AmeriCorps Program.

Big Changes in Montpelier

As our members most certainly know, big changes aren’t just sweeping their way through Washington D.C., but are also dramatically changing Vermont’s political landscape. Fortunately, the nightmare on Pennsylvania Avenue is not playing out the same way in Montpelier. Governor Scott has appointed most of his cabinet and, true to his campaign rhetoric, early indications are that he was sincere in his pledge to appoint competent people regardless of political affiliation.

According to Brian Shupe, “So far Governor Scott has put a solid team in place in many key Secretary, Deputy Secretary and Commissioner positions and should be commended for making such thoughtful appointments.”

Mitzi Johnson was elected to replace outgoing Speaker of the House Shap Smith. One of Johnson’s first moves was to reorganize the committee structure. She abolished the House Committee on Natural Resources and created a committee on Energy and Technology. Also related to this move, she renamed the Committee on Fish, Wildlife & Water Resources the Committee on Natural Resources, Fish & Wildlife, and expanded the jurisdiction of the Committee on Agriculture and Forestry to include forestry (previously the committee had jurisdiction over

forest products) and state lands.

Change is taking place in the Vermont Senate, with Chittenden County Senator Tim Ashe now serving as President Pro Tem. Ashe replaces John Campbell who retired last year. Addison County Senator Chris Bray will once again chair the Senate Natural Resources & Energy Committee. Four of that committee’s members will return, joined by newly elected Chittenden County Senator Chris Pearson.

VCV Releases Environmental Common Agenda

Vermont Conservation Voters released its 2017 Vermont Environmental Common Agenda of legislative priorities in late January. The Common Agenda, which VNRC signed on to, highlights the top environmental priorities and proposed solutions for the 2017 legislative session and represents the priorities of a range of environmental organizations across Vermont working on matters affecting our shared natural resources, the character of our communities, and the health of Vermonters. You can find it online at www.vermontconservationvoters.org.

VNRC Working With Legislators to Address Gaps in Toxic Chemical Safeguards

The PFOA contamination in Bennington revealed that Vermonters are not adequately protected from the release of toxic substances in our communities. Recently, the Working Group tasked with identifying gaps in laws aimed at protecting Vermonters from contamination by toxic substances like PFOA, released its report of recommendations to the Legislature. Jon Groveman, VNRC policy and water program director, said of the report, “VNRC is pleased that a majority of Working Group members voted to recommend that legislation is pursued to close these gaps. If adopted, these recommendations will dramatically improve protections for Vermonters and our environment.” VNRC will be advocating for lawmakers to adopt these recommendations this session.

VNRC, Sen. Sanders, Host “Climate Action Without DC” Webinar

In response to the Trump administration’s disregard for science and the urgent reality of our warming world, Senator Sanders joined VNRC and 15 partners on February 8th to bring over 1,000 Vermonters together on a webinar aimed at outlining the need for greater local and state action. Senator Sanders and Vermont State Senator Christopher Bray outlined ways to continue progress on climate change: joining or starting a town energy committee; supporting Vermont’s 90 by 2050 renewable energy goal; showing up, speaking out and getting more engaged at the local and state levels. “It is clear that global warming solutions in the U.S. will come from state and municipal leadership,” said VNRC’s Johanna Miller. “The purpose of this one-hour webinar was to deepen the commitment of concerned Vermonters and give them ideas on meaningful ways to engage. All responses we’ve heard thus far show that the call to action is working.”

Program Updates

Below is a brief rundown of VNRC's programs, a few recent highlights of our work, and program director contact information.

WATER PROGRAM

Works to protect and enhance the quality of Vermont's streams, rivers, lakes and ponds, wetlands, and groundwater.

- Finalized work on the legislative toxic Working Group that was formed last year in response to the PFOA contamination in Vermont and charged with making recommendations to strengthen the regulation of toxic substances in the state. The group's final report included all of VNRC's policy recommendations.
- Re-started the water caucus, which consists of groups focused on water quality issues, to coordinate work on water policy and positions in the Vermont Legislature.
- Intervened in the Morrisville Water & Light appeal of an ANR permit involving three dams on the Lamoille and Green Rivers to uphold long-standing precedent on how hydroelectric projects are evaluated under Vermont's Water Quality Standards.

PROGRAM DIRECTOR:
Jon Groveman, jgroveman@vnrc.org



FOREST AND WILDLIFE PROGRAM

Works to maintain and enhance the ecological and economic vitality of Vermont's forests with the overarching goal of keeping forests as forests to maintain their overall integrity.

- Collaborated to enact several pieces of legislation related to maintaining forests and wildlife habitat and strengthening municipal and regional planning for forests and wildlife connectivity.
- Celebrated the 10th Anniversary of the Forest Roundtable. VNRC has convened close to 40 meetings over the last decade with a broad spectrum of participants to maintain the integrity of forests.
- Coordinated an effort to build the statewide database on subdivision and parcelization trends in Vermont, with a focus on providing updates every year on a user-friendly webpage for planners and natural resource professionals.

PROGRAM DIRECTOR:
Jamey Fidel, jfidel@vnrc.org



ENERGY AND CLIMATE ACTION PROGRAM

Works to advance conservation, efficiency, renewable energy and transportation solutions that reduce fossil fuel usage and save Vermonters money.

- Worked with the Energy Action Network to roll out a new Community Energy Dashboard to help communities' baseline energy use and undertake strategic energy actions.
- In partnership with businesses, low income advocates, faith leaders and others, continued to advance tax reform policies that prices carbon pollution, grows the economy, and protects low income earners to turn the climate challenge into an economic opportunity.
- Helped to implement Act 174, which creates an enhanced framework for communities to plan for how they will partner with the State to meet our renewable energy and climate change goals.

PROGRAM DIRECTOR:
Johanna Miller, jmiller@vnrc.org



SUSTAINABLE COMMUNITIES PROGRAM

Works to protect and promote Vermont's traditional settlement patterns of compact settlements — with options for transportation, housing and employment — surrounded by farms, forests and unique natural areas.

- Completed training course for the Agency of Natural Resources designed to help local officials take action to protect forests, wildlife, and water resources.
- Worked with the Alliance for Vermont Communities to fight the oversized, private NewVista development in the Upper Valley towns of Royalton, Sharon, Strafford, and Tunbridge, including co-presenting on the project.
- Stood up in support of the Burlington Town Center redevelopment project, a smart growth development that has the potential to improve water quality, reduce sprawl, and provide housing and transportation options.

PROGRAM DIRECTOR:
Kate McCarthy, kmccarthy@vnrc.org



Member Profile

VNRC Member Profile: Peter Sterling

Peter Sterling knows what it means to be an advocate. He has spent much of his life advocating for pro-environmental policies both at the federal and state level for organizations like the League of Conservation Voters (LCV), the Sierra Club, and Vermont Wilderness Alliance (VWA). Recently, he took the chief of staff position for Vermont Senate President Pro Tempore Tim Ashe. Prior to that he worked on a campaign for affordable health care in Vermont, and served on the boards of VNRC and Vermont Conservation Voters.

How did you become an advocate?

Growing up, I spent a lot of time outdoors with my family. Trips to places like Vermont and California's redwood forests left an impression on me that the natural world was worth protecting. In college, I watched the Reagan Administration go after environmental protections, worsening many environmental challenges, and after seeing our environment getting trashed, I knew I wanted to be part of the solution. After I graduated from college I took a job as a journalist covering the environmental beat in Washington D.C. during the first Bush Administration. Eventually, I decided to work more on the offensive and took a job researching political races for the LCV, and later took the helm as the Political Director of the New York chapter of the League.

Environmental advocacy is often a defensive effort. Any victories you're proud to have been on the offensive line for?

As an organizer for VWA, we successfully advocated for the designation of 42,000 new acres of wilderness in the Green Mountain National Forest as part of the New England Wilderness Act. Working with advocates from Vermont and New Hampshire and securing bi-partisan support from the twin state federal delegates to get that bill passed - under the second Bush Administration - was incredible. Years of work went into that effort and this victory, among others, has convinced me that the environment is an issue everyone cares about, no matter your party affiliation.

Why is advocacy important to you and why do you support advocacy organizations?

Advocacy is important because we have a society that really isn't serving the needs of all of its people or the planet. Environmental issues, in particular, are often complex with many shades of gray. They're never win or lose; instead, they're fought at different levels, from town planning to statewide policy, and in the courts. That kind of engagement and expertise is beyond most volunteers, which is why I believe that you need professionals that go to their desk every day thinking about how



to move these issues forward. You need expertise to get the policies right and interpret those policies in a language average citizens can understand, and you need ongoing vigilance to make sure the implementation happens.

There are many important issues facing society and we need advocacy organizations to take on these issues. Yet many of these organizations have a single-issue focus, and in some cases that's good. But because environmental issues are so interconnected, the single focus approach isn't always the best. That's why I was so eager to join the VNRC board - it's not a one trick pony. It'd be hard to work on clean water without working on cleaning up agriculture, without protecting our forests, and without working on climate change, and VNRC does just that. It was great to be a part of such an amazing multi-issue group.

Environmental advocacy is a never-ending endeavor.

What keeps you going?

There's a real sense in Vermont that people are genuinely willing to hear you out on an issue and get involved. The cool thing about the environmental movement is that it brings together so many different people. Political affiliation doesn't really matter. And I've been able to work with so many amazing people over the years, like the staff at VNRC, legislators, organizers and volunteers. I know it's not like this everywhere, but I continue to be inspired to advocate for these issues.

Is there a particular issue you're most passionate about?

Climate change is the moral and environmental issue of our time. We are spending the world's natural capital at an incredible pace so we can live comfortable lives, and some can live extravagant lives. Everyone has a fundamental right to clean air, clean water, healthy food and a clean environment. Those things will be harder to come by freely as our climate changes, and the poorer among us will be hit the hardest. If you're not terrified about climate change you're missing something.

You also support VNRC financially as a recurring member.

Why is it important to you to also be a member?

As amazing as it is to have many dedicated volunteers throughout the state working on important environmental issues, at the end of the day you need professionals who have the expertise and the big picture in mind. I give to VNRC because I'm helping fund those professionals that are doing what most of us can't do because of our day jobs.



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VNRC Staff, Members, Activists, and Friends Join Women’s March on Washington

On January 21, nearly half a million people, including thousands of Vermonters, joined the Women’s March on Washington to protest the President’s malignant comments about women, minorities, and other groups, as well as the promises he’s made to roll back environmental protections and action on climate change.

VNRC was there, bringing along a busload of our members, activists, and friends, to march for our shared values of equality, justice and a healthy environment.

Back in Vermont, police reported that between 15 and 20 thousand Vermonters marching in solidarity in Montpelier. And across the country and world, millions of others marched, marking what may come to be the largest, single-day protest in American history. The historic scale and diversity of actions



VNRC staff, members, activists and friends at the Women’s March on Washington, January 21, 2017.

taking place on the day is an indication of the people power ready to mobilize to defend against social and environmental injustices that are coming out of the Trump Administration.

For our part, VNRC will build on this momentum to defend our shared values and chart a brighter future for people and the planet. We’ll also continue to respond to calls to action from our members, activists, and staff,

extending our advocacy beyond state borders when necessary. The Women’s March on Washington was a historic moment of national solidarity on our shared values, and likely will not be the last.

VNRC will be working with partners to promote and attend the April 29 Climate Change Rally in D.C. Stay tuned to www.vnrc.org for more information.

Save The Date: Seward Weber Lecture

Author Tom Wessels will speak about the importance of old growth forests in the northeast

When: 7:00 pm, March 16, 2017

Where: Unitarian Church, 130 Main Street Montpelier, VT