



VERMONT COUNCIL

July 16, 2020

Secretary Julie Moore
Agency of Natural Resources
1 National Life Drive, Davis 2
Montpelier, VT 05620-3901

Dear Secretary Moore,

The undersigned groups write to express our concern with a developing pattern at the Agency of Natural Resources (hereafter “the Agency” or “ANR”) of defunding or reallocating monies dedicated to smaller natural resources, environmental, or water quality projects and programs. These funds enable a wide array of groups across Vermont to engage in conservation and restoration projects including outreach, education, invasive species control, and water quality monitoring. This program defunding and reallocation occurred with minimal transparency and no input from partners or the public. We recognize that the Agency is assessing programs and budgets because COVID-19-related economic impacts have reduced revenue streams. However, our understanding is that cuts to these small grant programs were made in response to staff constraints at the Agency instead of budget shortfalls. We ask that going forward the Agency work in cooperation with partners and the public to find creative solutions for these constraints before program cuts are made.

In the past weeks, funds have been cut or reallocated from the LaRosa Volunteer Water Quality Monitoring Partnership, the Vermont Aquatic Nuisance Control Grants, and the Vermont Watershed Grant Program. There may well be additional cuts and reallocations to these programs, among others, proposed by ANR for FY21. These funds often go to smaller projects that can have a big impact. For example, cancelling the LaRosa program means that many rivers and swimming holes will not be tested for bacteria and pathogens this summer and that we will

miss a crucial year for monitoring impacts of state-funded clean water projects. We fully agree with the concerns and support recommendations of the letter sent recently by watershed organizations across the state on the elimination of the LaRosa Program. Additionally, the loss of Aquatic Nuisance Control Grants will mean that lakes and ponds groups will have more difficulty addressing the spread of aquatic invasives, which risks going back on headway made on the control of aquatic invasives in recent years.

The reallocation of the Watershed Grant Program funded through the sale of Conservation License Plates is troubling as these funds are intended for specific conservation uses listed in statute, which does not include staff time for other programs within the Fish & Wildlife Department. The website for the purchase of the Conservation License Plates as well as the letter sent for renewal plates specifically say that funds from the purchase of plates will be used for the Watershed Grants Program. “Proceeds from the sale of conservation plates support the Nongame Wildlife Fund and Watershed Grant Fund.” While there may be other pressing needs and worthy uses of license plate revenues, there needs to be transparency with the public if these funds are to be used for purposes other than those stated in public information promoting the program. We believe that instead of redirecting current year funds from this program to other uses, the Agency should at least have maintained the program as intended for this year, given that conservation plates had already been purchased and grant funds had already been awarded. If the Agency revamps the program in the future, we ask that the Agency ensure that there are still grant funds for these community-based watershed projects.

We acknowledge that these smaller grant programs may require substantial staff time to administer relative to their size, but we hope that the Agency could either modify internal operations to make these grant programs more efficient or look to a third party and partnerships for grant administration assistance rather than summarily ending the program.

We also understand that these smaller grant programs existed before Act 64 established the Clean Water Fund, which provides a larger amount of funding for clean water projects and programs than has been historically available. However, currently there are no funds available through Act 64 grant programs for water quality monitoring or small conservation projects or education and outreach work that has been funded through the Watershed Grant Program. Additionally, the imminent restructuring of the Agency grant program required in Act 76 will further squeeze funds for programs such as water monitoring and aquatic invasive management as the Agency seeks to maximize phosphorus and nutrient reduction.

As ANR continues to address COVID-19-related budget shortfalls in the coming weeks and months, we ask that the value of programs be weighed by more than just a dollar amount and staff time, and that the Agency look for creative solutions and possible partnerships before cutting projects and programs. Absent an alternative source of funding for water quality monitoring or small conservation projects the cuts that ANR have made to these programs should be restored in the budget ANR proposes for the remainder of FY 21.

Sincerely,

Vermont Natural Resources Council
Conservation Law Foundation
The Nature Conservancy
Lake Champlain Committee
Vermont Council, Trout Unlimited
Watersheds United Vermont

cc: Louis Porter
Commissioner, Vermont Department of Fish and Wildlife
Peter Walke
Commissioner, Vermont Department of Environmental Conservation
Representative Amy Sheldon
Senator Chris Bray