

Vermont Environmental Report

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Environmental Groups Ready to Ask for Key Legislative Measures in New Assembly

Public interest environmental groups will be an active lobbying force in the 1977 Session of the Vermont General Assembly that opens on Wednesday, January 5.

This year will be different in at least one key respect from previous sessions of the Assembly. For years, tax-deductible public interest environmental groups have been limited by IRS regulations from taking an active legislative role. Now all this has changed. With the passage of the federal Tax Reform Act of 1976, tax-deductible environmental groups are free to lobby.

This year, many more environmental groups will be active in the State House and these groups have unveiled a long list of environmental objectives.

The Lake Champlain Committee will be working to get passage of a bill to ban phosphates in household detergents. A bill that would have achieved this objective failed to pass by one vote in the Vermont Senate in the closing hours of last year's Assembly. Proponents of a "Phosphate Ban" argue that the passage of such legislation would reduce the degradation of Vermont's rivers, lakes, and streams. They further

argue that such legislation would lessen the need for sophisticated and therefore expensive sewage plant installations.

Vermont Tomorrow Legislative Action (VTLA) will work for legislation to promote community economic development, agricultural diversification, better energy planning and management, and an effective program of energy conservation.

The Vermont Public Interest Research Group (VPIRG) has outlined a long list of environmental objectives for the coming Session. Some of these are:

- A bill to ban phosphates in household detergents.
- A safe drinking water bill proposed by the Vermont Health Department.
- Energy conservation measures aimed at reductions in energy use in transportation and residential buildings.
- A transportation policy that emphasizes spot improvements, mass transportation, as

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opposed to Vermont's past commitment to four-lane highway construction.

- Nuclear measures that would prohibit utilities from passing on to consumers costs on any unscheduled shutdowns due to design defects and malfunction; a bill prohibiting the storage of radioactive wastes in Vermont; a bill to require a "Certificate of Public Good" before utilities can buy into out-of-state generating facilities.
- Reform of the Public Service Board; a bill to create Public Utility Districts; a bill to prohibit utilities from passing on to rate-payers the expense of promotional advertising; legislation to re-structure rates by offering lower rates to smaller users of electricity.

The Fair Tax and Equal Education Coalition will be offering detailed proposals on property tax reform for owners of farm, forest, and homestead land. In addition, the Coalition will outline measures to change the current system of state and local educational financing. The central feature of the Coalition's proposals for property tax reform is the suggestion that a "use assessment" of Vermont's farm, forest, and homestead lands be substituted for the current system of taxing land on the basis of "fair market value."

The Vermont Natural Resources Council is committed to working for the passage of a bill that would establish a "Register" of natural areas in Vermont. Such a Register would be a significant step toward the goal of protecting Vermont's fragile and irreplaceable natural areas through voluntary action. VNRC will also work for open space tax reform and may propose legislation to ensure sound timber harvest practices.

VNRC JOINS FAIR TAX AND EQUAL EDUCATION COALITION

The Vermont Natural Resources Council has announced its participation in the newly-formed Fair Tax and Equal Education Coalition.

The Fair Tax and Equal Education Coalition is the successor of the former Open Space Tax Coalition. In past sessions of the General Assembly, the Open Space Tax Coalition concentrated its attention on property tax reform for farm and forest lands. The new Coalition has a wider focus and a broader membership base. It will seek solutions not only to the property tax issue but also to the inter-related question of educational financing.

As far as property tax reform goes, this is what the Fair Tax & Equal Education Coalition wants from the 1977 General Assembly.

- (1) The Coalition wants an increase in the present limit of two acres that

can be used in calculating the tax relief for those homeowners and renters who qualify for the State's property tax rebate program. The Coalition wants up to 12 acres to be used in calculating tax relief under the rebate program.

- (2) The Coalition wants productive farm and forest land assessed and taxed at its use value, as a farm or forest, rather than at its potential higher value if it were sold for other uses.

- (3) The Coalition wants to introduce a new tax, called a "change-of-use" tax. This tax would reap some of the unearned profits from land sales when a piece of property changes from one use to another.

- (4) The Coalition wants to guarantee the right of land owners who qualify for this new use assessment to protect
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