

# Bulletin

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## ADVANCES SEEN FOR VERMONT'S FOREST LANDS

*Coalitions and Compromise Combine to Protect*

If any area of environmental protection might be said to be "on a roll," it would be forest conservation. There are encouraging signs that private citizens and lawmakers in Vermont have developed an increased awareness of forest conservation issues.

Those indications include:

- A round of public hearings conducted by the Forest Resources Advisory Council (FRAC) to identify land and forestry issues important to Vermonters;
- Publication in January of an interim report by FRAC which begins, at least, to define what would be involved in a comprehensive program of improved forest management;
- A House-passed bill that addresses clear cutting and puts a moratorium on aerial herbicide spraying in Vermont for two years; and

- Hints of movement in the Legislature toward property tax reform.

FRAC, revived by the Legislature in 1995, was asked to develop parameters to focus public and private forest management and conservation efforts, and to establish benchmarks to gauge their success over time. FRAC issued a preliminary report in the fall and hosted public discussions in four communities. Citizen input influenced an interim report published in January.

Disappointed that the report contained no clear response to public concerns about clear cutting, the House passed H.634, which gives FRAC until January 1997 to present a plan specifically addressing that issue. The bill also imposes a two-year moratorium on aerial herbicide spraying.

"This is what we had hoped for," said Jim Shallow, Director of VNRC's Forests and Outreach Programs. "There's a constructive dialogue developing between FRAC and the Legislature. When

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FRAC didn't accomplish what legislators wanted, the Legislature came back with very specific language."

Property tax reform is crucial to improved land management, and after years of inaction a compromise has finally been crafted by Senate leaders. The plan includes a \$25,000 homestead exemption for all Vermonters, a uniform state tax on new non-residential construction, and elimination of state subsidies through the Current Use program with the requirement that towns tax property upon use value only, supposedly obviating the need for the program. The property tax reform package may be significantly altered as it proceeds through the Senate and House.

And finally, VNRC's well-established living room meetings have now become forums for swapping computerized information on conservation issues. Two grants have enabled VNRC to

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