

Bulletin & Legislative Update

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THIS YEAR'S TOP ISSUES AT A GLANCE:

VERMONTERS MADE THE DIFFERENCE

The 2002 legislative session will not be remembered for exceptional substance on environmental policy issues. There were some major bills passed that put the environment out ahead, or, at the very least, left it unscathed. But the real winners of the session were the forces that made all of the difference this year: the quiet, unceremonious voices of Vermonters.

Without a doubt, VNRC could not have prevailed on so many fronts were it not for the help of an informed and motivated public. Over the past two years, more than any other in our recent history, VNRC made a commitment to getting Vermonters involved in the process, and it mattered. Legislators heard loud and clear from their constituents that protecting our natural

resources is paramount to life in Vermont.

When VNRC saw the controversy brewing over the West Mountain Wildlife Management Area (WMMWA), where understandable concerns of the hunting and fishing community were used to push for legislation that had more to do with logging, VNRC responded by reaching out to Vermonters who cared. VNRC organized our members and other organizations to contact their legislators. Vermonters responded with over a thousand post cards from citizens and scores of phone calls in support of the Special Treatment Area on WMMWA.

When the battle over the stormwater bill was heating up, VNRC and friends organized a series of Town Hall Meetings in Chittenden County to connect Vermonters with their Senators and create a forum for an informative discussion on the issues around the stormwater controversy. These meetings were not only well attended, but

were hailed by the Senators as a great opportunity to have a productive dialogue with their constituents. The debate was soon re-framed and a new bottom line had to be included in any piece of legislation that passed: clean water. In the end, an agreeable solution was created that will help clean up stormwater pollution in Vermont's beautiful but threatened Lake Champlain.



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VNRC is the Vermont affiliate of the National Wildlife Federation.

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Indeed Vermonters were there to respond on every issue that arose.

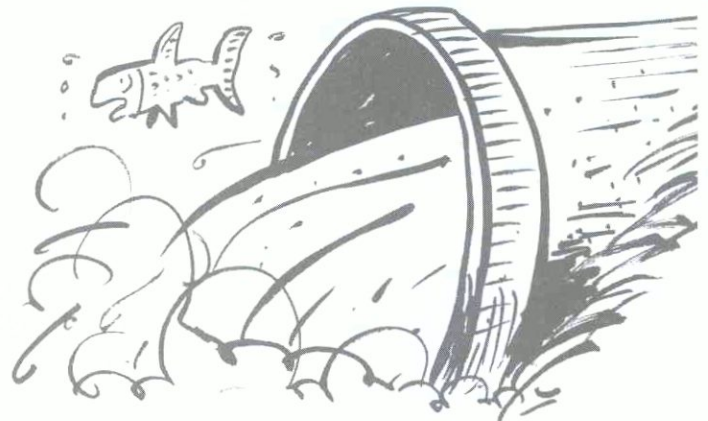
It is also noteworthy that this session marked the establishment of many productive new relationships for VNRC, and a more prominent role as a convener. On a variety of issues over the past two years, VNRC brought together significant coalitions of informed individuals, interest groups, legislators and administration staff that made a huge difference in the outcome of many bills.

Regardless of the approach, however, VNRC is confident that a new standard for citizen involvement and collaboration has been set. If Vermonters want to maintain a high standard of health for our natural resources, it will be critical to maintain this kind of support in the future. For those Vermonters who called or wrote their legislators, attended a hearing, or even testified before a committee, you made all the difference. We thank you very much!

STORMWATER

The issue of stormwater, the toxic brew of salt, sediment, oil, and pesticides in rain and melting snow that runs off of parking lots, rooftops, and roads, commanded a large amount of legislative attention this year. In reaction to a ruling last year by the Vermont Water Resources Board that additional sources of pollution could not be permitted in an already-impaired watershed, developers put pressure on legislators to do something to "fix" the Board's decision. VNRC was a key part of ensuring that a "fix" would not weaken Vermont's water quality laws.

The uncertainty, whether real or imagined, following the Board's ruling regarding



future development in watersheds with polluted streams or lakes, fueled a hearty debate that ultimately spilled outside of the State House. Early in the session, a great deal of controversy and animosity among various interests was created when the House produced a bill, H.644, that would have rolled back water quality laws to the days prior to the passage of the 1972 Clean Water Act.

By the time H.644 reached the Senate, however, a groundswell of grassroots opposition to the House bill engendered a shift in the debate. A "Stormwater Town Hall Meeting" organized by VNRC and other environmental groups at the Burlington Wastewater Treatment plant in February had Senators who were present singing a chorus that any bill ultimately had to be about clean water.

Between the Senate's desire for a bill that would not allow more stormwater pollution to dirty Vermont's rivers and lakes, coupled with a timely memo from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency which opined that H.644 violated the Clean Water Act in a variety of ways, the atmosphere started to change. VNRC, the Vermont

Agency of Natural Resources, and business interests started working together to come up with a bill that everyone could live with: VNRC pushed for language that would improve the treatment and cleanup of stormwater runoff, and the development community pushed for provisions that they believed would give them more predictability in the permitting process. In the end, a solution to the impasse was reached. The Senate passed the collaborative legislation, and the House concurred.

Although we worked hard to find a solution to the stormwater dilemma, VNRC made it clear that legislation regarding stormwater runoff was unnecessary. In fact, the stormwater statute had been comprehensively revised in the 2000 legislative session. The 2002 language did provide some additional benefit, however, including the requirement for all new discharges to meet the improved stormwater treatment standards contained in the 2002 Vermont Stormwater Management Manual. This is a significant improvement over the old performance manual, which, at times, created more stormwater pollution problems than it solved.