



# VERMONT Legislative Bulletin



## ENVIRONMENTAL UPDATES FROM VNRC & VCV



# Advancing Our Environmental Goals

*Notable Wins and Groundwork Laid in the 2021 Legislative Session*

By Brian Shupe,  
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The COVID-19 pandemic dramatically shifted the political landscape in Vermont. In the months following the initial lockdown, the Vermont Legislature rightly focused most of their time and energy on supporting families and economic recovery.

Still, VNRC and VCV had the opportunity to advocate for recovery efforts that will address the climate crisis, water quality, and invest in programs that employ people to build a more resilient, more equitable, and healthier future.

We made the most of the virtual legislative session, advocating for environmental priorities and developing creative opportunities for legislators to learn about our issues.

Together, our work led to some notable wins. We played a key role in enacting a nation-leading bill to ban toxic PFAS chemicals from food packaging,

firefighting foam, ski wax, and carpets and rugs. This bill passed both the House and Senate unanimously, and was then signed into law. A bill to modernize our bottle redemption law, and

improve recycling, passed the House and will be taken up by the Senate next year. We helped secure a historic commitment in climate and energy investments of \$250 million, as well as \$225 million in clean water funding – in both cases taking advantage of one-time federal funds.

After Vermonters cast 45,000 more votes in the 2020 general election than in any election in the state's history (73% via absentee ballot), we were pleased to see a bill pass that expands universal vote-by-mail to all general elections in Vermont going forward. VNRC and VCV identified this bill as one of our key priorities for this year, because we recognize that a healthy democracy is essential for a healthy environment.

The partnership between VNRC and VCV helps make these and other victories possible. We collaborate to

bring both policy expertise and political savvy to our advocacy campaigns. VNRC leans on its long standing history of bringing a nuanced, well-informed perspective to policy debates. VCV holds lawmakers accountable using tools like our online Environmental Scorecard, and works to recruit, train, and elect candidates who share our vision so we have strong pro-environment legislative majorities.

Looking ahead to next year, we are excited to continue advocating for a green recovery. We anticipate taking on new innovative efforts to educate lawmakers and engage our members in the legislative process. And we plan to spearhead coalitions and continue working with our partners, as always.

In the coming years, Vermont has a unique opportunity to ensure that federal dollars are put towards strategic investments that support vital communities and a healthy environment. VNRC and VCV look forward to championing bold climate action, clean water for all, intact forest ecosystems, a long-overdue environmental justice policy, protections from toxic chemicals, reducing plastic pollution, and other issues critical to a healthy future for Vermont's land, waters, and people.



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## Federal Funding Opens New Channels for Climate and Energy Investments

Just over \$1 billion in one-time federal money from the Biden administration’s American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) gave lawmakers an unprecedented opportunity to invest in climate solutions.

In April, Governor Phil Scott presented a plan to invest \$200 million of Vermont’s ARPA funds in initiatives like weatherizing homes, improving electric vehicle infrastructure, and expanding electrification, and \$100 million to implement the Climate Action Plan. The plan, which is currently under development by the Vermont Climate Council, is the roadmap for meeting Vermont’s climate commitments established by the Global Warming Solutions Act.

Johanna Miller, VNRC’s Energy and Climate Program Director, was appointed by the Vermont House of Representatives last year to serve on the Climate Council.

Ultimately, the Legislature committed to investing \$250 million in climate initiatives, with approximately \$50 million in climate programs this coming year, and at least \$200 million over the next three years to implement the Climate Action Plan.

We thank everyone who called their legislators and urged them to make a significant commitment to climate action! These historic investments are an important baseline for the transformation of our energy future.

## Annual “T-Bill” Makes Important Strides

COVID-19 changed the way Vermonters got around. For some, it reduced (or eliminated) car commutes, and more time was spent walking, biking, and recreating in public spaces. Many people who had relied on public transport started

taking it less often, to avoid crowds. More Vermonters found themselves unable to afford their personal vehicles, making energy efficient upgrades feel especially out of reach.

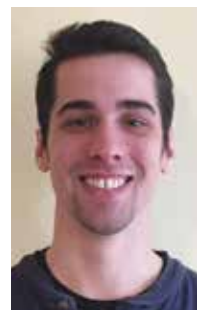
So it was fitting that this year’s Transportation Bill (T-Bill) adopted a variety of policies to help Vermont ease into a more sustainable, accessible, and affordable transportation future during these uncertain times.

The legislation invests in increased incentives to help Vermonters purchase electric or high efficiency vehicles. It includes a “replace your ride” program that allows eligible residents to trade in their 10+-year-old car for incentives towards a hybrid or fully electric vehicle. It expands the MileageSmart incentive program, which provides eligible Vermonters with lower incomes up to \$5,000 for the purchase of a used, high-mpg or zero-emissions vehicle. There are incentives for purchasing electric bicycles as well.

The T-bill also waives all fares, for another year, for rural and urban public transit. With transportation being the largest single source of greenhouse gas emissions in Vermont, these steps towards a more energy-efficient transportation system are significant, and we’ll be watching to ensure they are implemented in a way that benefits Vermonters equitably.

## Daniel Jarrad Stays on Top of Zoom Legislature

Daniel Jarrad came on board as our Legislative Intern in January. Previously an intern for the Vermont Legislative Climate Solutions Caucus,



Daniel brought a strong interest in climate and energy policy to his position. He assisted VNRC, VCV, and the Vermont Planners Association (VPA) in tracking legislation moving through the Legislature in 2021.

In previous years, you might have

met Daniel under the Golden Dome, in hallways or committee rooms. This year, of course, was different. The Legislature conducted its business over Zoom.

“Navigating the halls of a virtual State House has been challenging, but equally rewarding,” said Daniel. “It’s shown that even in difficult times, smart and good policy is attainable and those working hard to advocate for it have been more important than ever.”

Daniel grew up in Vermont and studied International Affairs at Lewis & Clark College in Portland, Oregon. In his free time, he can be found climbing indoors and outside as the weather warms up. He also enjoys bike rides and finding new fishing spots.

## Clean Water Wins

Vermont’s wetlands will benefit with the enactment of H.108, which ensures that these valuable ecological spaces are safeguarded by State water laws that currently protect lakes, ponds, rivers, and streams. The law also requires projects with large wetland impacts, like oil and gas pipelines, to undergo a rigorous analysis and avoid impacts when alternatives exist.

By providing carbon storage, water filtration, wildlife habitat, and flood mitigation, wetlands provide important defenses against the impacts of climate change.

In 2021, VNRC and VCV also weighed in on issues related to water funding. Building on the state’s long-time commitment to cleaning up polluted waters and modernizing our water infrastructure, lawmakers put forward an unprecedented level – \$225 million – of clean water funding over the next three years.

This investment included significant ARPA funding to help upgrade our drinking water and wastewater systems, address combined sewer overflows, remove toxic contaminants from water supplies, implement dam safety projects, and address other water infrastructure needs.

In April, VNRC and the Lake Champlain Committee (LCC)



Bob LoCicero

appealed a State permit allowing the sinking of the Adirondack, a retired ferry, in Lake Champlain as an artificial reef for scuba divers. The project raised red flags regarding the pollution of drinking water, the health of underwater ecosystems, and a lack of fairness in determining the use of public waters.

In response to our advocacy, the decision to sink the ferry was reversed and the Legislature enacted a three-year moratorium on sinking vessels in public waters. We’ll continue to advocate for the responsible use of Vermont’s waters that takes into account the public good and environmental health.

## Investing in the Places Where We Live, Work, and Play

The Vermont Legislature also made a strong commitment to supporting key economic revitalization, land conservation, and land use programs that further the state’s smart growth goals.

In particular, the budget included a historic multi-year investment for the Vermont Housing and Conservation Board (VHCB) at \$94 million, and one-time increases of \$3 million for the Working Lands Enterprise Fund and \$2 million for state parks. Other programs that support our downtowns and villages were also funded: \$1.5 million for the Better Places programs, \$5 million for transportation grants in Vermont’s downtowns and villages, and \$11 million to clean-up contaminated “brownfield” sites.

Together, these budget allocations represent an unprecedented commitment to

investing in Vermont’s communities, including our historic downtowns and villages, while enhancing access to affordable housing and protecting natural areas and our working lands. These expenditures are especially important as we recover from the COVID-19 pandemic and prepare for other health, economic, and environmental challenges that lie ahead.

The Vermont Legislature also continued examining policies to promote intact and healthy forests. These included strategies to improve protections of older forests via the Current Use program, and policies to address forest fragmentation and maintain a viable rural forest economy. Work will continue on these issues next year.

## Vote-by-Mail Made Permanent

After months of advocating for a strong vote-by-mail policy during the 2020 elections, VCV was pleased when lawmakers pushed through legislation this year that implements permanent, universal vote-by-mail for all general elections in Vermont.

This past November’s presidential election saw record-breaking turnout across the state, thanks largely to Vermonters’ ability to vote remotely. This legislation fosters a healthier democracy by permanently expanding our options for casting a ballot.

In particular, it allows or expands access to people experiencing homelessness, people who are housebound, youth, those working multiple jobs, BIPOC Vermonters, and others who often face considerable barriers in getting to the polls.



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# Protecting Vermonters From “Forever Chemicals”

This year Vermont enacted a nation-leading law (S.20) restricting the sale of consumer products that contain per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances, known as PFAS. Not only do PFAS chemicals migrate from these products into our bodies; when the items are disposed of, contaminants leach into our water, presenting further threats to human and environmental health.

Toxic “forever chemicals” like PFAS don’t break down in the body or in the environment, and are linked to health impacts such as high blood pressure, thyroid disease, and kidney and testicular cancers. Harm to the immune system due to PFAS exposure has broad-ranging effects, from

reduced ability to fight off viral infections like COVID-19, to reduced responsiveness to vaccines.

Vermont’s new legislation is the most comprehensive PFAS bill in the country. It bans the sale of firefighting foam and food packaging that contains these contaminants. It is also the first state law to ban PFAS in ski wax, rugs, carpets, and stain-

resistant treatments.

There are established, cost-competitive, effective alternatives to all of these products that do not contain PFAS, making this shift not only necessary for human health, but also timely and feasible. Many corporations have already shifted to selling non-PFAS alternatives to common household items, and

major restaurant and grocery chains are taking action to eliminate PFAS from their food packaging.

“We applaud our state’s leadership for taking such strong action, leading the nation in banning the sale of products that contain these harmful chemicals,” said Lauren Hierl, Executive Director of Vermont Conservation Voters (VCV).

