

VNRC

VERMONT NATURAL
RESOURCES COUNCIL



A Year in Review – 2023

Reflecting on a year dedicated to safeguarding Vermont's natural resources, fostering coalitions, and strengthening our membership after 60 years of environmental leadership



Dear VNRC Members,

I recently let our members and partners know that, after nearly 13 years in what is arguably the best job in Vermont, I've decided to step down as the Executive Director of VNRC.

While I'm looking forward to the next chapter in my life, the honor and pleasure of having worked closely with such talented and dedicated colleagues, and a committed and supportive Board, makes this a bittersweet decision for me. In what has truly been a team effort, VNRC has grown stronger and more effective since I assumed this role in October 2011, and we have a long list of accomplishments.

We have made significant progress on many of our priorities, including combatting the climate crisis by accelerating Vermont's transition to clean energy and making our communities more resilient to the impacts of a warmer world. We have continued working to protect and restore Vermont's waters, maintain forest health and wildlife habitat, and facilitate sustainable community development and affordable housing while discouraging sprawl. We have successfully engaged in strategic litigation on several occasions to ensure that laws are properly enforced and to achieve our goals when other options are not available.

We have also expanded our work to remove toxic chemicals from the environment, and launched an initiative to collaborate with landowners and state and federal officials to remove derelict dams to restore aquatic ecosystems and enhance public safety.

We have accomplished so much, in part, by reinvigorating our role as a convener and forging scores of partnerships and coalitions across the state. Most importantly, we entered into a strategic partnership with the Vermont League of Conservation Voters (now Vermont Conservation Voters) that has strengthened both organizations well beyond our initial expectations. And, we have made important strides to integrate a commitment to equity and environmental justice in all aspects of our work.

I am proud to be leaving VNRC on solid financial footing and with strong systems in place. It is an excellent time to bring on a new leader with a fresh vision and the ability to build on over 60 years of efforts on behalf of Vermont's natural resources, people and communities – and to take VNRC even further.

Our Board, in conjunction with the Vermont Conservation Voters Board, has established a succession committee who will be working with staff and an executive transition consultant over the coming months with the goal of bringing on a new Executive Director in August. I will stay on until that time to help ensure a smooth transition. Additional information about the transition process, and future updates, may be found on our website, www.vnrc.org.

I can't thank our members, partners, Board and staff enough for all of your support, collaboration and shared commitment to Vermont's future. We have accomplished so much together, yet there remains much work ahead. I look forward to remaining engaged in a different role to continue promoting VNRC's mission, one that will involve more time in the woods and less time in meetings, and more time reading books and less time reading emails.

Sincerely,
Brian Shupe

Our Year At A Glance

Advancing Accessible Clean Energy

Keeping homes and businesses warm while reducing our dependence on fossil fuels was a priority for clean energy action over the past year, as Vermont’s thermal heating sector continues to be the second highest contributor to our state’s carbon pollution. We worked with a broad coalition of organizations to advocate for the Legislature’s passage of the Affordable Heat Act, the enactment of which launched a 2-year process to design a program to incentivize fossil fuel importers to deliver cleaner heat options to Vermonters. With 73% of the energy used in our thermal sector coming from fossil fuels, this policy provides an opportunity to create a gradual, sector-wide clean energy transition for energy providers, keep our energy dollars invested locally in renewables, and ensure we are defining a pathway for an equitable clean energy transition.

Throughout the 2023 legislative session, we filmed **18** Climate Dispatch videos with **12** different legislators that received over **1,700** views.



Protecting Forests and Wildlife

The U.S. Forest Service estimates that Vermont is losing upwards of 12,000 acres of forestland every year. If this rate continues, more than 300,000 acres of Vermont’s forestland may be lost by 2050, with significant negative consequences for ecosystem health, habitat for wildlife species, the ecological viability of natural lands, and our working lands economy. Fortunately, we have a path toward reversing these trends and protecting Vermont’s critical natural resources and forested landscape, for all of the important benefits they provide. Last legislative session, we helped pass H.126, or the “30 x 30” bill, which recognizes these challenges by requiring the creation of a statewide conservation plan that elevates conservation as a necessary strategy to promote the health of Vermont’s forests and watersheds, and creates a process to conserve 30% of Vermont’s land by 2030, and 50% by 2050.

From 2010 to 2020, undeveloped forestland in Vermont decreased by **108,770** acres.



Strengthening Sustainable Communities

Vermont is experiencing a housing crisis and a climate crisis, and solutions to these issues can go hand in hand. Last legislative session we worked with many partners and legislators to help pass S.100, the HOME bill, which aims to reduce zoning-enforced sprawl and related environmental pressures by enabling development in smart growth areas. We have long advocated for a smart growth approach to planning and development that creates compact, walkable, transit-accessible communities with a range of affordable housing opportunities and choices. Along with the important changes to zoning and development in S.100, the legislature also asked for two critical studies to more effectively guide the state's development patterns and target more systemic changes to our land use laws, including Act 250. Together, these studies provided an important opportunity to improve planning for and strategic investments in smart growth housing, and inform recommendations to reform Act 250 that are now under consideration in the 2024 legislative session.

Our Small Grants for Smart Growth grant program has awarded over **\$40,000** to **23** projects in communities around the state since its inception in 2018.



Championing Clean Water

Vermont saw firsthand over the past year how caring for our waters is increasingly important to maintaining our resilience in a changing climate and amid the threats posed by flooding, toxic chemicals, poorly planned development, and runoff. On the heels of this past summer's devastating floods, we hosted a series of three events around the state with watershed experts, legislators and other community partners. These events were focused on elevating frontline community voices and the need for policies that support clean water and build climate resilience. The river corridors, riparian areas, and wetlands of Vermont have the ability to support biodiversity, filter our water supply, mitigate flooding, and provide recreational opportunities to connect to the outdoors. In 2024, we will continue our work to advocate for the crucially important watershed protections that our state needs. Additionally, many dams in Vermont pose a risk to communities during climate-induced flooding events. We continue our work to remove dams that are serving no useful purpose, in order to better safeguard communities, improve watershed health and natural river flow, and protect biodiversity.

VNRC has helped remove **6** dams in **6** different towns within the Lake Champlain Basin the past **5** years, and reconnected **107** miles of river.



Working to Make Environmental Protection a Top Priority for Lawmakers

Our partner organization, Vermont Conservation Voters (VCV), was instrumental to the advancement of all of the renewable energy, forest conservation, sustainable community, and clean water accomplishments we achieved in 2023. Beyond that, VCV played a key role in the Senate’s unanimous passage of a nation-leading bill to ban toxic chemicals including PFAS and other “forever chemicals” from cosmetics, menstrual products, textiles, and artificial turf. VCV also worked on legislation to expand ranked choice voting, which also passed the Senate but will still need to pass the House. As we enter an election year in 2024 and the impacts of climate change continue to be exacerbated, VCV’s work to elect pro-environment candidates and hold our lawmakers accountable to their voting record on environmental legislation, through tracking votes on key bills and publishing an annual scorecard, will remain of utmost importance.

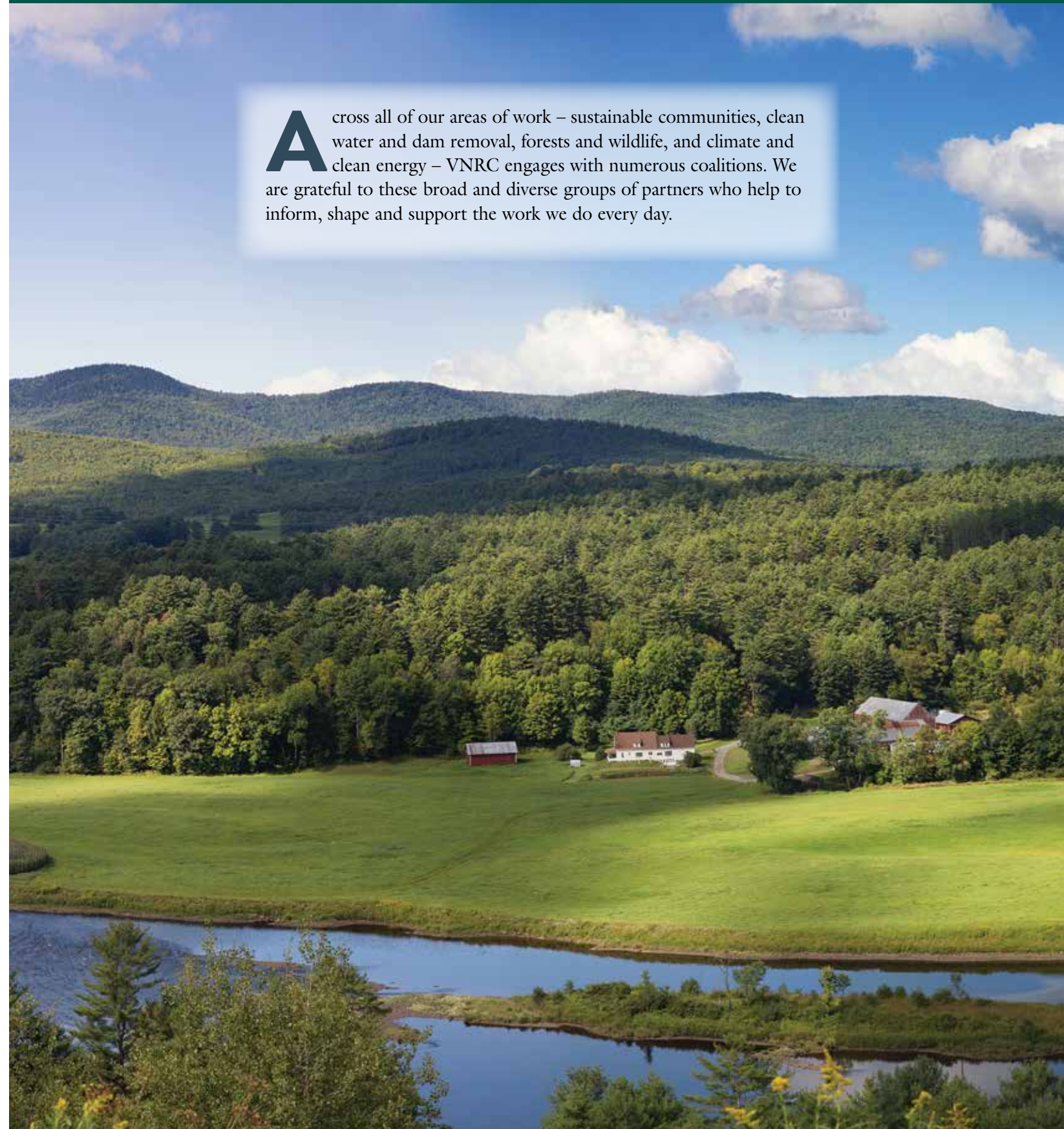
Unlike VNRC, which the Internal Revenue Service has granted status as a 501(c)(3) organization, VCV is registered as a 501(c)(4) organization. This status allows VCV to engage in activities to influence the outcome of elections. As a 501(c)(3), VNRC is not allowed to engage in those activities. The partnership between VNRC and VCV allows for sharing staff and resources on a limited basis with appropriate guardrails to ensure compliance with IRS regulations. VNRC does not engage in electioneering by endorsing, supporting, or opposing candidates for office.

Of all the candidates
VCV endorsed in
the 2022 election,
86% were
elected and went
on to achieve major
legislative progress
for Vermont’s
environment in 2023.



Fostering Coalitions

Across all of our areas of work – sustainable communities, clean water and dam removal, forests and wildlife, and climate and clean energy – VNRC engages with numerous coalitions. We are grateful to these broad and diverse groups of partners who help to inform, shape and support the work we do every day.



Transportation for Vermonters

Advocating for a Rural Transportation System That Works for all Vermonters

Our automobile-centric transportation system is highly polluting, expensive, and inaccessible to many, and Vermonters deserve better. Our Sustainable Communities program coordinates Transportation for Vermonters (T4VT), a statewide, cross-sector coalition dedicated to building an equitable, affordable, and sustainable transportation system for all Vermonters. Since 2017, T4VT has been the leading voice for a sustainable and equitable transportation system for Vermont.

In 2023, T4VT hosted a State House lobby day to connect transportation advocates directly with lawmakers, and testify for major priorities in the omnibus Transportation Bill, or T-Bill. By the end of the session, thanks to the advocacy of the coalition and many others, the Legislature passed, and Governor Scott signed into law, the largest transportation bill yet. The bill included \$18.2 million for bicycle, pedestrian and transportation alternatives program funding, a historic \$48.8 million investment in public transit, and \$43 million in rail

projects. It also took important steps to reduce carbon emissions from the transportation sector by investing \$27.9 million across multiple efforts, including expanding electric vehicle charging.

Partners involved in Transportation for Vermonters include: AARP VT, American Lung Association in Vermont, CarShare Vermont, Chittenden Area Transportation Management Association, Green Mountain Transit, Local Motion, Old Spokes Home,

Renewable Energy Vermont, Vermont Businesses for Social Responsibility, Vermont Chapter of the Sierra Club, Vermont Clean Cities Coalition, Vermont Center for Independent Living, Vermont Energy Education Program, Vermont Energy Investment Corporation, Vermont Natural Resources Council, and Vermont Public Interest Research Group.

Learn more: <https://www.t4vt.org/>



The Forest Roundtable

*Collaborating to Protect Vermont's Forested Landscape
and Address Fragmentation*

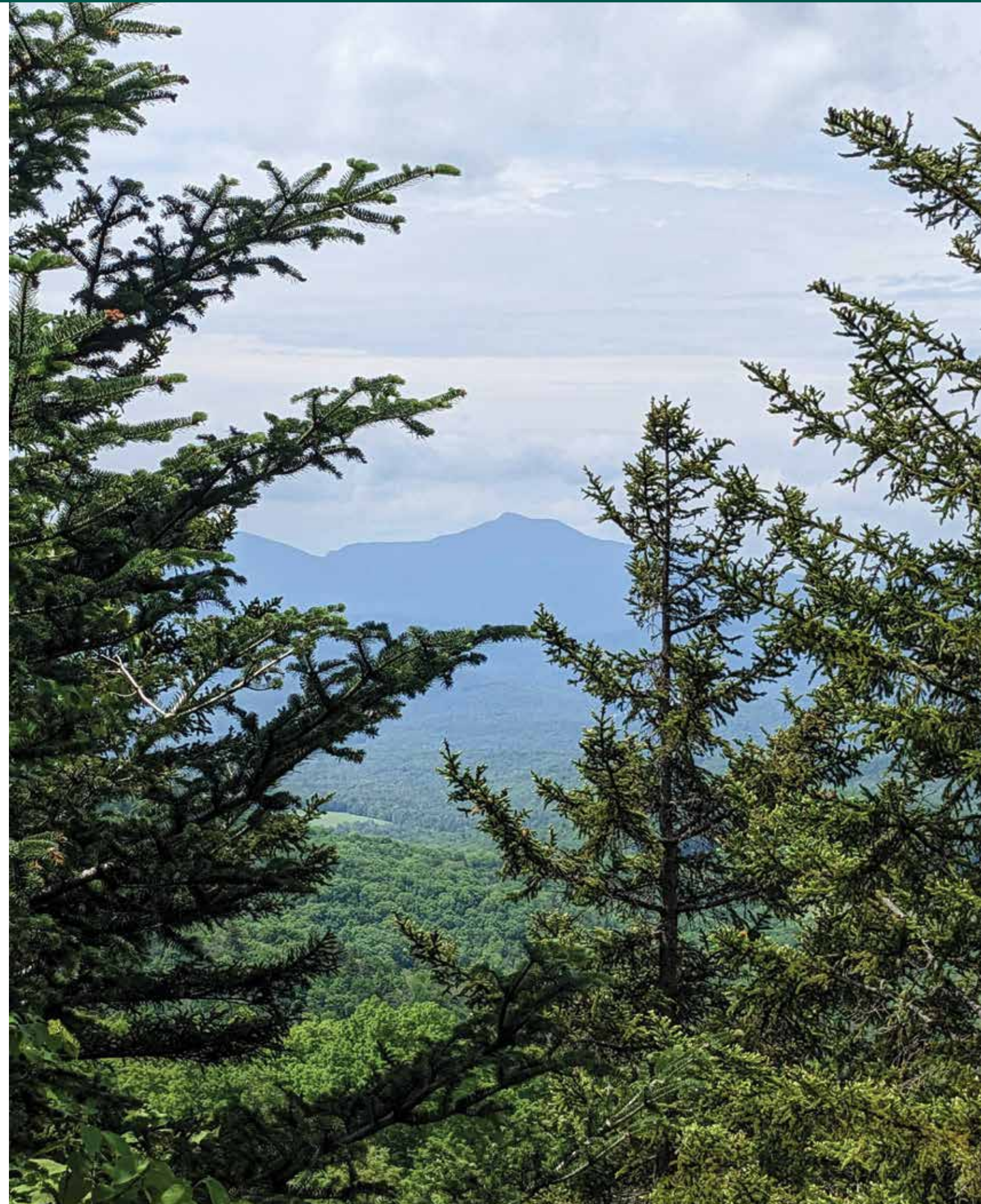
Vermont is the third-most forested state of the lower 48, with roughly 4.5 million acres of forestland covering approximately 78% of the state. Forests maintain air quality, water quality, flood resilience, and wildlife habitat, and are a valuable tool for fighting climate change by sequestering and storing carbon. But our research shows that the phenomenon of forest fragmentation through the subdivision of forestland into smaller and smaller pieces and multiple ownerships is increasing. Conceived of and convened by VNRC in 2006, the Forest Roundtable is a venue for the exchange of information regarding forest policy, and protection of Vermont's forests, with particular attention focused on addressing parcelization and forest fragmentation.

The goal of the Forest Roundtable has been to create a forum for people with a wide range of perspectives to exchange information and, where possible, develop recommendations for policy changes to benefit forests. Since its first meeting in June 2006 with 30 participants, the Roundtable has grown to encompass a listserv of over 250 people and has met over 50 times. In June 2023, VNRC convened the Forest Roundtable for a meeting at Vermont Technical College in Randolph. The agenda for the day included a recap of the 2023 legislative session (including details on the newly passed 30x30 conservation bill, H.126, which many Forest Roundtable partners were involved in helping pass), an update on federal issues relating to forests including the Farm Bill and Green Mountain National Forest projects, a series of presentations to examine tools for understanding the status of forests and biodiversity in Vermont, and a prioritization of future Forest Roundtable topics for discussion and collaborative work.



Partners involved in the Forest Roundtable include (but are not limited to): Vermont Department of Forests Parks & Recreation, Vermont Department of Fish & Wildlife, Green Mountain National Forest, Silvio O. Conte National Wildlife Refuge, staff from the Vermont Federal Delegation, University of Vermont School of Forestry, Forest Ecosystem Monitoring Cooperative, Northern Forest Center, Vermont Sustainable Jobs Fund, Vermont Council on Rural Development, University of Vermont Extension, Vermont Forest Products Association, Vermont Center for Ecostudies, Backcountry Hunters and Anglers, Vermont Housing & Conservation Board, Vermont Nature Conservancy, Trust for Public Land, Vermont Land Trust, Audubon Vermont, Northeast Wilderness Trust, Standing Trees, Vermont Sierra Club, Vermont Woodlands Association, Vermont Family Forests, Cold Hollow to Canada, Atowi Project, Vermont Coverts, Vermont Natural Resources Council, Association of Vermont Conservation Commissions, and the Vermont League of Cities and Towns.

Learn more: <https://sites.google.com/vnrc.org/forest-roundtable/>



The Water Caucus

Stewarding Cooperation on the Development of Clean Water Policy

Protection of our watersheds is essential to building resilience for our communities and environment as climate change continues to intensify extreme weather events. Improved tracking systems and protections for our wetlands provide a nature-based solution to flooding, as they store, filter and purify our water, and provide habitat for plants and animals. Giving our rivers room to meander by limiting development in river corridors helps to protect biodiversity and our communities by mitigating the impacts of flooding. But crucial policy change to ensure that these necessary safeguards are put in place for the health of our state takes coordinated, strategic advocacy.

Since 2014, VNRC has convened a group of partners working to advance watershed protections to better involve the environmental community in the development and implementation of sound water policy in Vermont. The Water Caucus brings relevant information to watershed organizations and other interested parties to enable them to engage on these issues in a constructive, efficient, and effective manner. In 2023, the Water Caucus identified a set of shared legislative priorities for the 2023/2024 biennium of the Legislature, which were shared with the Chairs of the House and Senate Environment Committees. Some of these priorities included passage of H.126, otherwise known as the 30x30 conservation bill, a bill to establish a process for recommending riparian zone protections, a wetland net-gain policy, and creating a system for preventing aquatic nuisances in State waters.

Partners involved in the Water Caucus include: Vermont Natural Resources Council, Conservation Law Foundation, Connecticut River Conservancy, Lake Champlain Committee, The Nature Conservancy in Vermont, Watersheds United, Strictly Trout and Vermont Conservation Voters.

Learn more: <https://vnrc.org/clean-water/>



The Vermont Dam Task Force

Committing to Restoring Rivers in Vermont Through Dam Removal

Vermont has more than 1,000 dams, and hundreds serve no useful purpose. Instead, they degrade water quality and aquatic habitat, restrict the movement of fish and other wildlife, increase maintenance and liability costs, and pose significant risks to public safety. As the flooding of July 2023 clearly demonstrated, these derelict dams also raise natural water levels, making communities downstream even more prone to flooding. By focusing on dam removal, we can mitigate the risk of flooding, improve water quality, reconnect aquatic habitat, and enhance the overall health of our watersheds.

The Vermont Dam Task Force is a group of river and fish biologists, anglers, community members, freshwater advocates and conservation organizations, that are working to restore and reconnect our rivers to support thriving aquatic ecosystems, improve recreational access, and enhance a river's natural capacity to handle flooding. In 2023, VNRC worked to help remove the Connolly Pond Dam in Shrewsbury, Vermont. The dam was removed in the interest of public safety to reduce flood risk, and reconnect and restore a headwater tributary to the Mill River, which ultimately flows to the Otter Creek and then Lake Champlain. There are currently 18 other dam removal projects VNRC is engaged in, with 2 dams slated for removal in the summer of 2024.

Partners involved in the Vermont Dam Task

Force include: Vermont River Conservancy, Vermont Department of Environmental Conservation, American Rivers, Vermont Rivers Program, Watersheds United Vermont, Vermont Land Trust, Connecticut River Conservancy, Lake Champlain Basin Program, Vermont Fish & Wildlife, Vermont Nature Conservancy, Friends of the Winooski, Association of Vermont Conservation Districts, White River Partnership, Trout Unlimited, New England Interstate Watershed Pollution Control Commission, U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, American Whitewater, and Vermont Natural Resources Council.

Learn more:

<https://freevermontrivers.org/>



The Vermont Energy & Climate Action Network

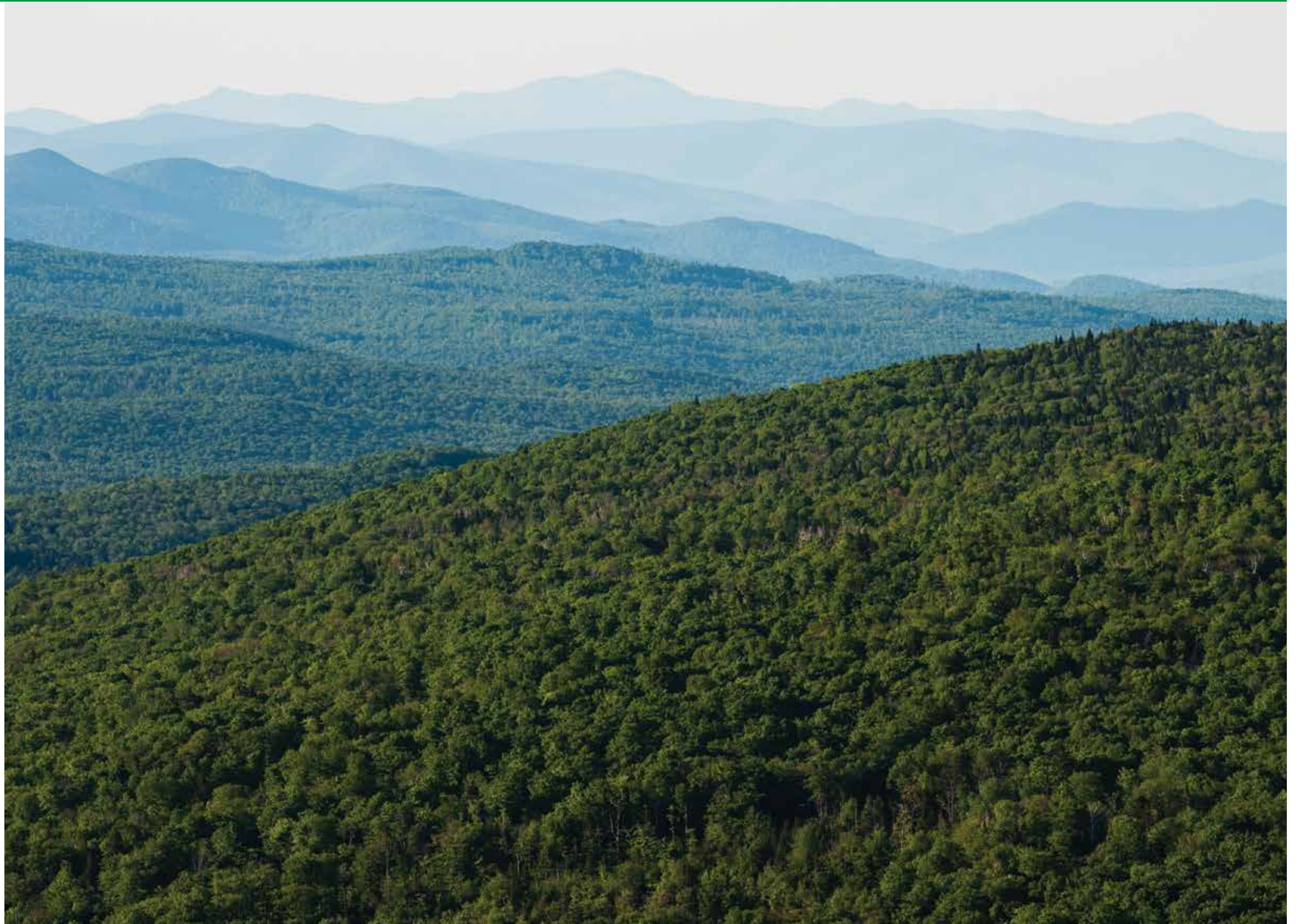
Connecting and Activating Vermont Communities for Clean Energy Progress

Addressing the climate crisis and equitably advancing clean energy solutions that work for all Vermonters takes work at many levels – from the State House in Montpelier to small groups of volunteers working to help their communities advance meaningful change. In 2005, VNRC co-founded the Vermont Energy and Climate Action Network (VECAN), which is a collaboration of organizations working to start and strengthen community energy committees. We support grassroots efforts to implement local energy innovation projects and help the state make progress towards our necessarily-ambitious clean energy and climate action goals.

There are over 120 town energy committees across Vermont. VECAN supports their work by offering networking, communications, capacity building, educational resources, and direct technical assistance. In 2023, VECAN started the year by hosting a virtual Winter Workshop series for town energy leaders focused on building capacity and tapping into key opportunities to help advance climate progress in Vermont. Then, in June of 2023, we hosted a lively and inspiring in-person summit at Middlebury College, where the day kicked off with remarks from climate champion Bill McKibben. This well-attended event included many opportunities for local energy leaders to network, share challenges and successes, and collaborate on crucial opportunities for climate action. In December, we hosted the 16th annual Winter VECAN Conference, which included virtual sessions on accessing new funding opportunities for climate and clean energy, a legislator roundtable on resilience and climate solutions, and peer-to-peer gathering for local energy leaders to share their work.

Partners involved in VECAN include: Efficiency Vermont, Vital Communities, the Energy Action Network, the Vermont Council on Rural Development, Vermont Natural Resources Council, and 120+ town energy committees around the state.

Learn more: <https://vecan.net/>



Gratitude For Member Support

We extend our sincerest appreciation for the unwavering support of our members. Without your support, none of the work we do every day – in the State House, in your community, in collaboration with partners and experts, and for the protection of Vermont’s natural resources – would be possible. We are so grateful to hear from you, be supported by you, and to work on behalf of all of you to achieve big progress for our environment and our communities. Thank you for making our work possible for another year.

Over The Past Year:

- Over **2,000** Vermonters called their legislators or took action to support critical environmental legislation because of VNRC’s efforts
- More than **7%** of VNRC members give with recurring donations
- Over the past **10** years, our members have donated over **\$8 million** to support VNRC’s work

VNRC Pembers Persist!

- **67%** have been members for more than **10** years
- **44%** have been members for more than **20** years
- **33%** have been members for more than **30** years

Member Profiles

Kim Greenwood

“VNRC cares about what I care about: clean water, healthy forests, engaging and lively downtowns, and laws that help support those priorities. I’ve been a member for 20 years, because I value this organization so much and with climate change bearing down on us, well, VNRC has an outsized role to play. Many Vermonters don’t have the ability to engage as deeply as they’d like to on a day to day basis on the breadth of the issues, so we rely on the staff and board of VNRC to be current on the science and on the best policy advocacy to help protect and enhance what makes us want to stay in Vermont. I trust VNRC’s position on the issues and I’m proud to support this important organization.”

Greenwood is the Chief Operations Officer for the Vermont Agency of Natural Resources. She is a longtime beekeeper and former president of the Vermont Beekeepers Association. Previously, Greenwood served as the Deputy Commissioner of the Vermont Department of Environmental Conservation, and was Water Program Director and Staff Scientist for VNRC for ten years.



Curt Lindberg

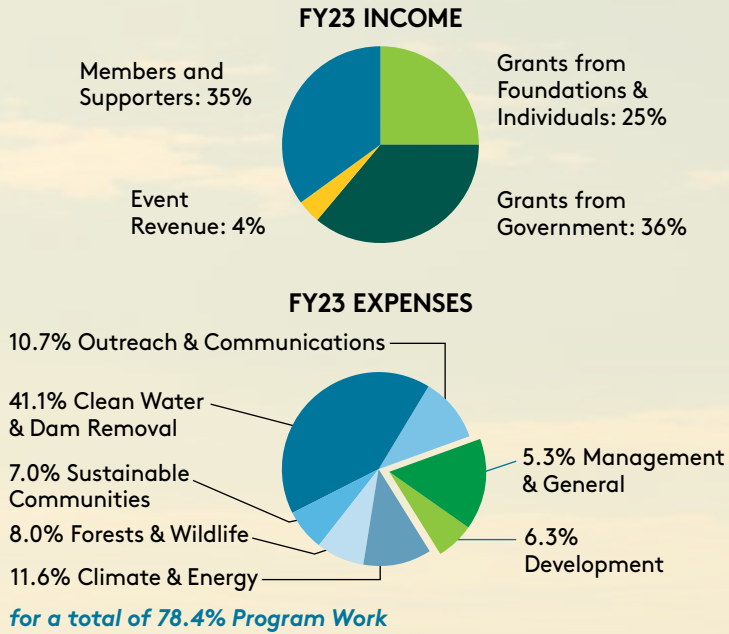
“I feel blessed that my family and I are residents of a state served by VNRC. The talented staff of the Council understand the human and natural landscape of Vermont deeply and through an ethic of collaboration advance the well-being of all state’s inhabitants, including the human kind. I am especially grateful for the role VNRC leaders played in helping bring together many conservation organizations and state departments to form the Vermont Biodiversity Alliance in a bold initiative to advance the cause (accelerate the preservation) of biodiversity in the state and nation.”

Lindberg serves as Chair of the Waitsfield Conservation Commission, and helped found the Vermont Alliance for Half-Earth and the Vermont Biodiversity Alliance, where he currently serves with John Kress as a Co-chair of the Alliance’s Steering Committee. He co-edited, with Eric Hagen, the book “Our Better Nature: Hopeful Excursions in Saving Biodiversity,” published by VNRC, the Vermont Alliance for Half-Earth, the Northeast Wilderness Trust, and the Lintilhac Foundation.



2023 Financial Overview

The success of our work continues to rely on the financial support of our membership, which accounts for more than one third of our organizational income. We also receive strong government and philanthropic funding. The majority of organizational expenses are our program work – our day to day efforts to educate, advocate, and show up for Vermont’s environment and communities – while the rest is spent on general management and development. Over the past decade, our staff has grown from 9 to 15 people, and our expenses have more than doubled. We look forward to continuing to grow our work and effectiveness in the years ahead.





CELEBRATING
60 YEARS

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NONPROFIT
ORGANIZATION
U S POSTAGE
PAID
Permit No. 61
Montpelier, VT

SYRCL's WILD & SCENIC[®] FILM FESTIVAL
where activism gets inspired

SCAN HERE!

SAVE THE DATE

Woodstock
Town Hall Theatre
April 4, 2024

Burlington
Main Street Landing
April 18, 2024

vnrc.org/wsff2024

VNRC VERMONT NATURAL RESOURCES COUNCIL

The poster for the Wild & Scenic Film Festival features a central illustration of a beaver holding a film reel that shows a scenic landscape with trees and flowers. The background is a light green and yellow gradient. The text is in various fonts, including a bold sans-serif for the main title and a script font for the tagline. A QR code is located on the left side, and the festival dates and locations are listed on the right.