Vermont NRCS State Technical Committee Meeting

May 14, 2025 | 9:30 am – 12:00 pm
In-person: USDA State Office, Colchester
Virtual: Microsoft Teams

NEXT MEETING IS SCHEDULED FOR JULY 16, 2025

Attendees (Colchester): Travis Thomason (NRCS), Luis Aponte (NRCS), Bob Thompson (NRCS), Jim Eikenberry (NRCS), Diana Dellinger (NRCS), Phylicxia Moore (NRCS), Cheyanne Rico (NRCS), Angela Hyldburg (NRCS), Wendy Wilton (FSA), Eileen Powers (FSA), Chris E. Smith (USFWS), Nina Gage (VAAFM), Marli Rupe (VT DEC), Michelle Monroe (VACD), Alli Wells (VACD/VAWQP), Julia King (VACD/NRCC), Katy Langenhorst (VACD), Peter Danforth (CCNRCD), Emily Finnegan (CCNRCD), Sam Mayne (ECNRCD), Clara Fernandez Odell (ECNRCD), Lauren Weston (FCNRCD), Sarah Skelding (LCNRCD), Sarah Damsell (OCNRCD), Heather Blunk (WCNRCD), Whitney Burgess (PMNRCD), Lesley-Ann Dupigny-Giroux (UVM), Ryan Karn (AFT), Janelle Hangen (GLFC), and John Thurgood (Thurgood Consulting Services/Public).

Attending (MS Teams): Marybeth Whitten (NRCS), Dave Blodgett (NRCS), John Van Hoesen (NRCS), Kevin Norwood (NRCS SPSD), Patrick Suprunowicz (RD), Ryan Joseph (Senator Sanders), Ryan McLaren (Senator Welch), Thomas Renner (Congresswoman Balint), Dave Adams (VT FWD), Keith Thompson (VT FPR), Emma Eason (VAAFM), Will Eldridge (VFWD), Jill Arace (VACD), Ryan Patch (VAAFM), Stacy Cibula (VHCB), Roy Beckford (UVM Extension), Vern Grubinger (UVM Extension/VVBGA), Julie Callahan (UVM Extension), Rachel Stievater (UVM Extension), Nancy LaRowe (NOFA-VT), Theresa Vander Woude (EPA), Jim Habana Hafner (AFT), Daniel Koenemann (WNRCD), Jennifer Byrne (WRNRCD), Michael Fernandez (Bennington Co NRCD), Katie Stiles (RNRCD), Molly Varner (GICNRCD), Pam Stefanek (OCNRCD), Erin Rodgers (Trout Unlimited), Chief Don Stevens (Nulhegan Abenaki Tribe), Amelia Tutmalria Evans-Brown (Intertribal Agriculture Council), Jillian Liner (Audubon Vermont), Margaret Fowle (Audubon Vermont), Hannah Baxter (VT Farm to Plate), Susie Howard (UVLT), Chris Spencer (AFT), Natasha Duarte (CAV), Hazel Adams-Shango (Flying Buffalo Farm/Public), and Unknown Caller (802-272-0323).

Agenda

Time	Topic	Speaker
9:30 – 9:35 am	Welcome and NRCS Update	Travis Thomason
9:35 – 9:40 am	Farm Service Agency Update	Wendy Wilton
9:40 – 9:45 am	Rural Development Update	Patrick Suprunowicz
9:45 – 10:00 am	Legislative Update	Congressional Delegation
10:00 – 10:15 am	Locally Led Conservation Delivery (LLCD)	Travis Thomason
10:15 – 11:55 am	LWG Feedback and LLCD Proposals	NRCD District Managers
11:55 – 12:00 pm	Wrap-up	Travis Thomason

Welcome and NRCS Updates:
Travis Thomason, State Conservationist, NRCS Vermont

Welcome. Review of ground rules for hybrid meetings. Review of the agenda.

There have been changes since we last met in January. An important "take home message" is that NRCS is "open", and we are conducting business as usual. Demand for conservation is at the highest level we have ever seen. We've received over one thousand applications for assistance this year. On average we receive four hundred to six hundred applications. Field Offices have ranked and selected applications and are now obligating contracts for fiscal year 2025. Likely obligation amounts: EQIP - $16m (~150 producer contracts); CSP - $3m (previously ~ a couple hundred thousand dollars); ACEP - $5m (requested an additional $4m).

Inflation Reduction Act (IRA) Update: Currently not able to obligate new producer contracts under this funding source. Signed in August 2022 for about $20 billion for NRCS. The Administration is trying to figure out what to do with this funding. There might be a possibility that we could get these funds this year or next year, but we are unsure at this time. There is demand in the system for these funds for producer contracts.

Staffing: We did have some staff leave through "Fork in the Road" (Fork) and Deferred Resignation Program (DRP). Specific details are being managed by the Department. There was an Ag media outlook that published approximately twenty-five hundred employees have left NRCS (~22% of the workforce). Vermont is close to that number, with a mix of some new to the team and others more experienced and closer to retirement. So, we are smaller them before. If we were to receive additional IRA funds, it could be challenging, but we will do everything we can to get conservation on the ground with our existing staff and partners.

NRCS Chief: Aubrey Bettencourt Chief Bettencourt is the first woman Chief. She is a third-generation almond farmer out of California and is very focused on continuing to optimize and streamline the work that the agency is doing. She is always saying that our focus is to keep farmers farming. We are anxious to see what the priorities are from the Administration and the Chief.

Subcommittees: Meetings are taking place and feedback is being provided for improvements in FY26.

August 22, 2025 – Assessment deadline for FY26 conservation funds
Applications are accepted on a continuous basis.

Welcome to our new USDA colleagues, Wendy Wilton (FSA) and Patrick Suprunowicz (RD).

Farm Service Update:
Wendy Wilton, State Executive Director, FSA Vermont

- Glad to be back. I had a great relationship with the prior NRCS STC and look forward to continuing the work.
- Chief Bettencourt has a great background, including FSA SED in California, where she did a lot of work regarding water supply issues and time with the Interior, Bureau of Land Management. She's great to work with and a real "go-getter".
- A big challenge for the VT FPAC team is the office in St. Johnsbury. Our request for rescission from GSA has been denied. We are hoping to push off the date of June 30, so it can be reconsidered later.
- We do not have a staffing model yet for FSA but hope to receive that in the coming weeks. I'm hearing that the Secretary wants to retain the people we have at FSA, which is good news.

- Connecting with folks across the state, including Secretary Tebbetts and Farm Bureau team.
- Starting travels this month to get to the Service Centers across the state.

Eileen Powers, Agricultural Program Specialist, FSA Vermont

- **CRP is open – Deadline: June 6, 2025**. Nationwide we are close to the ceiling of acreage allowed to be enrolled per the 2018 Farm Bill. The first batch of applications are due to the National Office by June 6th. They will announce the results of the first batch by June 27th. If there is acreage remaining, they will open a second batch, etc.

Rural Development Update:

Patrick Suprunowicz, State Director, RD Vermont & New Hampshire

- Staffing: Hit hard with DRP. The focus is on identifying the holes that need to be filled to rebuild the office. Met with predecessor and reviewed a staffing plan they had put together. More recently I've been out in the field talking with stake holders. There are concerns because they are receiving email "kickbacks", and they are not sure who to speak with. Will work with my team to make a communication plan with regards to POCs to provide support to customers. Awaiting guidance from national headquarters on how we will be able to do the staffing rebuild. The primary focus is on identifying the biggest holes.
- Offices: Brattleboro - not being utilized; Montpelier - need to get out files.

Legislative Updates

Senator Sander's Office

Ryan Joseph, Outreach Representative (VT), ryan_joseph@sanders.senate.gov

- There is nothing addition to share beyond what Ryan and Thomas have already shared (see below).
- As an Outreach Rep, I try to get out and see folks doing the work on the ground. So, if you have tree plantings or other events going on, I'd love to find some time to connect and see how things are working out. I'm super excited to hear about all the work you are doing and hope to stay in touch.

Senator Welch's Office

Ryan McLaren, Outreach Representative, ryan_mclaren@welch.senate.gov

- Senator Welch had an Ag Committee hearing yesterday explicitly about the Conservation Programs. It was generally cordial and productive.
    - Main takeaways were that USDA Offices need to be staffed and have the resources necessary to serve Vermont farmers. Primary concerns are that prior to the reduction in force, VT offices were not staffed adequately or resourced properly to serve Vermont farmers. That was top of Peter's list and his questioning for folks.
    - More broadly, the need to continue funding the ACE-ALE Program and the RCPP and to be sure that farmers who have signed contracts with the American Government receive the funding on those contracts.
- Bigger picture – How can we improve these programs: Streamline processes for farmers and technical providers to get resources on the ground and conserve land faster. Unfortunately, the conversation should be happening with the new Farm Bill, but it isn't happening right now.
- Express appreciation to Travis, Wendy, and Patrick for expressing the need to staff these offices, and on how well the agencies work together and with the Congressional Delegation.
- We're in the middle of the appropriations process and we have passed the deadline for earmark requests. But we were able to secure some important Conservation CDS request in the past that will carry over and look forward to securing those for Vermont (like Intervale, VHCB and others) again. But if there are programmatic requests, things that folks in the room find useful and would

like to see us sort of explicitly support in the appropriations process, just let us know. That is always helpful information.

Congresswoman Balint's Office
Thomas Renner, Community Liaison/Constituent Services Representative (VT), thomas.renner@mail.house.gov

- In agreement with what Ryan shared, FSA, RD, and NRCS did not have enough staff. We're trying to help the best we can with that issue.
- The House is working on the budget with a possible vote on Friday. The majority side are still looking for more cuts. The Congresswoman is fighting against cuts to SNAP and Medicaid.
- The House is also not currently working on the Farm Bill. Had hoped to be having conversations in the Ag Committee but they died away a few months ago. The Congresswoman is hoping to restart conversations with New England colleagues who are members of the Ag Committee, as we know how important the Farm Bill is to you all.

LWG and LLCD Proposals

Travis Thomason, State Conservationist
Diana Dellinger, ASTC for Programs; NRCD District Managers and team

Vermont Locally Led Conservation Delivery: Where We've Been and Where We're Headed
About 2 years ago we started having conversations on how NRCS can strengthen relationships with the Conservation Districts. The relationships have existed since the 1930's, since the Dust Bowl era, which was the birth of our agency, Soil Conservation Service and the Soil Conservation Districts. I've had a lot of positive experiences in my career with Conservation Districts, and I've always felt if NRCS is going to be successful in this work, we need to do it hand in hand with Conservation Districts. This effort is a CPI (Continuous Process Improvement) project, and I want to thank everyone involved in the design of what we are calling the Locally Led Conservation Delivery. Today's meeting is to hear the culmination of what the Conservation Districts have been doing and their priorities.

Reminder: Local Work Groups are a subcommittee of the State Technical Committee. Normally they report out during the July meeting with the other subcommittees. But as part of this project, District Managers wanted an opportunity to come before the State Technical Committee and share what their local workgroup priorities are.

Review of our agency's Mission and Vision

Inform and Invest through Locally Led Conservation

- Inform – Provide recommendations to NRCS and feedback on priority natural resource concerns, general program recommendations, training needs, CPS improvements or interims.
- Invest – Recommend how NRCS will invest Financial Assistant (FA) in local conservation priorities, tier to Conservation Action Plans (CAPs), Locally Led Conservation Plans (LLCPs)
- Our goal is to direct our EQIP allocation, (around $10 million) eventually, by the year 2028 or 2029, about 80% towards locally led conservation. So that means, depending on what future Farm Bills look like, we could see between $6-$8 million available for local conservation districts and their local work groups to really attack and address key priority resource issues.

Bennington County NRCD – Michael Fernandez, District Manager

- The Bennington County Conservation District Board of Supervisors and the Local Working Group propose a three-year, $1 million per year Local Fund Pool to support the implementation of Agroforestry practices in Bennington County. This proposal follows a comprehensive, community-driven assessment process that incorporated public forums, producer surveys, and peer-reviewed research to identify top resource concerns and priorities. The fund will support a countywide goal of establishing 1,000 acres of Agroforestry by 2035 to address both USDA

NRCS resource concerns and broader challenges such as flood risk, food insecurity, and the resilience of working lands. Agroforestry practices implemented at this scale will improve soil health, reduce erosion, enhance water quality, support livestock systems, and restore wildlife habitat. At the same time, they will increase the land's capacity to absorb stormwater, diversify local food production, and strengthen farms against climate extremes. Core practices will include Alleycropping, Silvopasture, Forest Farming, Riparian Buffers, Hedgerows, and Windbreaks, each paired with the planning and support needed for long-term success. Please see the attached presentation for further information.

Caledonia County NRCD – Emily Finnegan, District Manager

- The Caledonia County NRCD submitted a Locally Led Conservation Delivery proposal focused on High Tunnels, Conservation Cover, Irrigation Water Management, Soil Carbon Amendment and Low Tunnel Systems. Please see the attached presentation for further information.

Essex County NRCD – Clara Fernandez Odell

- The Essex County NRCD initiated our 2025 Locally Led Conservation Process with a public survey and a public meeting and meal in Guildhall this spring. We plan to continue our community engagement and work on building a more robust social infrastructure around working lands and conservation by holding public meetings in Canaan and Brighton this summer and fall. The top three priority resource issues identified during our local working group process (public meeting, survey, partner discussion) were water quality, climate change, and social and economic viability and resilience at the household, business, and community scale. We hope to submit a proposal for a Local Fund Pool for FY27, following a more robust series of conversations with our community and partners.

Franklin County NRCD – Lauren Weston

- The Franklin County NRCD submitted a Locally Led Conservation Delivery proposal for $2 million for Farmstead and Infrastructure Projects. Please see the attached presentation for details of the proposal.

Grand Isle County NRCD – Molly Varney

- The Grand Isle County NRCD submitted a Locally Led Conservation Delivery proposal with the goal to improve soil health across the county by promoting agronomic practices that enhance soil structure, reduce erosion, increase organic matter and provide water quality protections. Please see the attached presentation for details of the proposal.

Orleans County NRCD – Sarah Damsell

- Thank you to NRCS and Travis for your outward support for this effort with the Conservation Districts. Through our community conversations, we heard a lot of issues related to significantly wet conditions and requested that NRCS work to robustly address this excessive moisture resource concern. There is also a need for built-in systems to work with the data that districts collect, as there is a significant amount of engagement and a significant amount of important information gathered, but limited capacity to adequately work with the data. For our Locally Led Conservation Delivery proposals, Orleans County Conservation District conducted a similar process to others, with two public meetings, a partner meeting and a survey. All of which, along with previous years' local work groups, informed the conservation action plan that Orleans submitted and the three local fund pool requests. The three fund pools focused on these natural resource priority concerns:
    - Slowing high flows to improve water quality in headwater areas in the Barton River
    - Support small farms by improving soil health, forage production, nutrient cycling while protecting natural resources.
    - Slow the spread – Invasive Plant Control
- Community Feedback: https://www.orleanscountynrcd.org/2025-locally-led-conservation-community-engagement

Lamoille County NRCD – Peter Danforth, District Manager; Sarah Skelding, Agricultural Program Specialist

- This proposal includes the usage of five practices to conserve forest structure and health in Lamoille County, a critical resource for industries such as syrup production and tourism, as well as maintaining the identity of the County. Please see the attached document for further details.

White River NRCD / Ottauquechee NRCD – Jennifer Byrne, District Manager

- The White River and Ottauquechee (WR/O) Local Working Group, chaired by the White River Natural Resources Conservation District (NRCD), in collaboration with the Ottauquechee NRCD, submits this proposal in response to the FY2025 Locally Led Conservation Delivery (LLCD) Request for Proposals (RFP) issued by the Vermont State Office of the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS). This report synthesizes extensive community-based input, technical assessments, and planning frameworks into a unified Locally Led Conservation Plan (LLCP) aimed at addressing priority natural resource concerns in east-central Vermont.
- https://www.whiterivernrcd.org/fy-2026-white-river-ottauquechee-local-working-group-report-and-local-funding-pool-request
- https://www.whiterivernrcd.org/free-trees-for-livestock-farms
- https://www.whiterivernrcd.org/free-trees-for-livestock-farms

Windham County NRCD – Heather Blunk, Agricultural Resource Specialist

- The Windham Conty NRCD submitted three Locally Led Conservation Delivery proposals focused on Small Agriculture, Forest Management Plans, and Forest Health. For each proposal we identified the targeted goals, the project area, the core conservation practices, and the timeline. Please see the attached presentation for further details.

Wrap-up

Travis Thomason, State Conservationist, NRCS Vermont

Thank you to all the District Managers and your teams for your support and collaboration. When it comes to conservation, it's important to target and focus your efforts on that which is most meaningful to the local community, and that is this effort. We will be gathering feedback on the process and identifying opportunities for improvements for the next fiscal year.

Just a reminder that we're waiting on the administration's priorities. After we receive those, we will talk about the State Technical Committee 2.0, incorporating your feedback and state level feedback into our work.

Future meetings:

- July 16, 2025, 9:30 am – 12:00 pm (reports from other STC subcommittees)
- October 22, 2025, 9:30 am – 12:00 pm (explain how we adopted your recommendations)

Thank you so much.
Meeting adjourned at 11:55 pm

Welcome! VT State Tech Committee | May 14, 2025

Ground Rules for Hybrid Meetings

- **REMOTE attendees:**
  - MUTE your microphone in TEAMs
  - Attendance: Type your name, title and affiliation into the chat
  - Questions: "Raise your hand" or type your question in the chat
  - Important reminder: The chat is for questions or comments relevant to the current topic/presentation. Please do not have "side conversations" in the chat

- **IN-PERSON attendees:**
  - Attendance: Sign in on the attendance sheet
  - We are using a video camera, "Poly" which is in the north-central area of the room
    - Talk clearly and look towards the Poly
    - If logged into TEAMs, mute your speaker, microphone, and camera
    - Poly will serve as the speaker, microphone, and camera for the room
    - Please avoid side conversations as the Poly will pick them up and make it difficult for Teams participants to hear and it will distort the recording and transcript
  - Questions: Raise your hand or use the chat in Teams

Agenda - May 14, 2025

Time	Topic	Speaker
9:30 - 9:35 am	Welcome and NRCS Update	Travis Thomason
9:35 - 9:40 am	Farm Service Agency Update	Wendy Wilton
9:40 - 9:45 am	Rural Development Update	Patrick Suprunowicz
9:45 - 10:00 am	Legislative Updates	Congressional Delegation
10:00 – 10:15 am	Overview of Locally Lead Conservation Delivery (LLCD)	Travis Thomason
10:15 - 11:55 am	LWG Feedback and LLCD Proposals	NRCD District Managers
11:55 - 12:00 pm	Wrap-up	Travis Thomason

USDA Vermont State Office
356 Mountain View Drive,
Colchester, VT

MS Teams
Join the meeting now
Meeting ID: 279 705 378 828
Passcode: xCmmYX

Or call in (audio only)
+1 202-650-0123,,49030138#
United States, Washington DC
Phone Conference ID:
490 301 38#

USDA United States Department of Agriculture

Vermont Locally Led Conservation Delivery

Travis L. Thomason – VT NRCS State Conservationist

Natural Resources Conservation Service

nrcs.usda.gov

USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service
U.S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE

Mission

We deliver conservation solutions so agricultural producers can conserve natural resources and feed a growing world.

Vision

Clean and abundant water, healthy soils, resilient landscapes and thriving agricultural communities through voluntary conservation.

"Helping People Help the Land"

Inform and Invest through Locally Led Conservation

- *Inform (FA)*
  - Provide recommendations to NRCS via Local Work Groups
  - Feedback on:
    - Priority natural resource concerns
    - General program recommendations
    - Training needs
    - Conservation Practice Standard (CPS) improvements or interims
- *Invest (FA)*
  - Recommend how NRCS will invest FA in local conservation priorities
  - Tier to Conservation Action Plan (CAP)
  - Locally Led Conservation Plans
    - Formerly known as “Locally Led Fund Pool” proposals

Field Office Natural Resource Inventory and Analysis

Partner and other natural resource plans, business plans, etc.

Local Work Groups
Utilizing Conservation Partners

Conservation District Conservation Action Plan (CAP)
(includes prioritized order for addressing natural resource problems)

Process:

An on-going planning process utilizing existing conservation plans, watershed assessments; conservation agencies, organizations, groups, and producers to develop consensus on over-arching 5-10 years local goals and priorities for conservation; including vision, resource inventories, resource problems, desired outcomes, other government / NGO partners interests and contributions.

Product:

A long range (5-10 year) strategic natural resources conservation action plan

Locally Led Conservation Plan
Specific problem and focused area of interest

Priority 1
Title:

- Overview
- Problem Statement
- Goals and Objectives
- Alternatives
- Proposed Solution and Actions
- Partnerships and Other Funding Sources
- Implementation (timeframe, TA, FA, marketing plan, sequence, coordination, etc.)

Locally Led Conservation Plan
Specific problem and focused area of interest

Priority 2
Title:

- Overview
- Problem Statement
- Goals and Objectives
- Alternatives
- Proposed Solution and Actions
- Partnerships and Other Funding Sources
- Implementation (timeframe, TA, FA, marketing plan, sequence, coordination, etc.)

Locally Led Conservation Plan
Specific problem and focused area of interest

Priority 3
Title:

- Overview
- Problem Statement
- Goals and Objectives
- Alternatives
- Proposed Solution and Actions
- Partnerships and Other Funding Sources
- Implementation (timeframe, TA, FA, marketing plan, sequence, coordination, etc.)

Process:

Using an iterative, area-wide planning process; prioritize and develop a detailed strategy to address each problem. This strategy is intended to accelerate the conservation implementation for each issue and leverage NRCS resources required to solve the problem.

Products:

Multiple LLCPs

*LLCP's = mini-RCPP proposals

USDA United States Department of Agriculture

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Natural Resources Conservation Service

nrcs.usda.gov

Agenda - District Proposals

Time	Topic	Speaker
10:15 - 10:25 am	Bennington LLCP	Michael
10:25 – 10:35 am	Caledonia LLCP	Emily
10:35 – 10:45 am	Essex LWG Feedback	Sam and Clara
10:45 – 10:55 am	Franklin LLCP	Lauren
10:55 – 11:05 am	Grand Isle LLCP	Molly
11:05 – 11:15 am	Lamoille LLCP	Peter
11:15 – 11:30 am	Orleans LLCPs (3)	Sarah
11:30 – 11:40 am	White River Ottauquechee LWG Feedback	Jennifer
11:40 – 11:55 am	Windham LLCPs (3)	Heather

Bennington County Conservation District

Agroforestry Local Fund Pool

AGENDA

01 Vision & Purpose

02 Process

03 Primary Conservation Practices

04 Financial Assistance Model

05 Why Agroforestry?

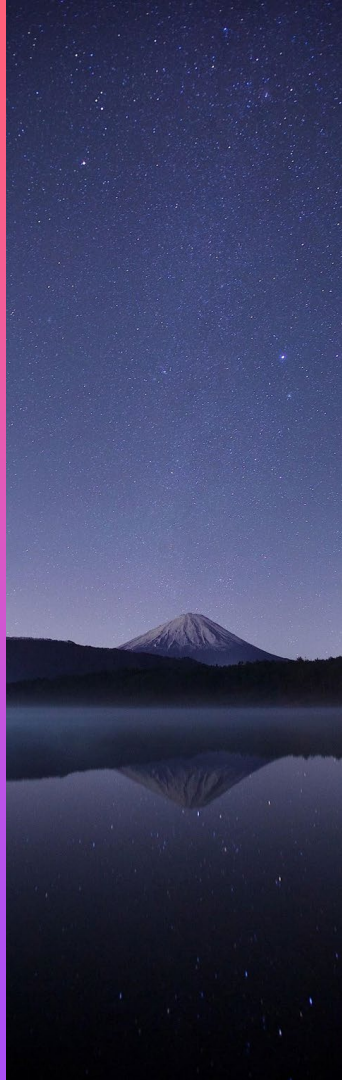
Vision & Purpose

THE VISION

To create a permanent and prosperous agriculture run by happy, healthy people.

Purpose

BCCD is proposing the implementation of 1000 acres of agroforestry systems in the next decade.



Process

The Process

- **294 stakeholders engaged** through surveys, forums, and outreach
- **Conservation District Surveys:** 55 local landowners and farmers
- **Stakeholder Engagement:** 53 participants from at-risk communities
- **Shires Direct Producer Survey:** 165 local food producers
- **Community Forums:** 21 residents on conservation challenges
- **Literature Review:**
  Tactical Basin Plans, VT Climate Action Plan, IPCC AR6, PES Report, NE Feeding Roadmap, and more

Resource Concerns Identified

Locally Led Process Outcomes:

- **Increased Flooding and Unpredictable Weather:**
  Highlighted through widespread landowner concern over flood damage, erosion, and water management.

- **Food Security and Local Food System Challenges:**
  Identified through producer surveys and forums on supply chain vulnerabilities and market access barriers.

- **Farm Viability and Soil Degradation:**
  Rooted in stakeholder concerns about declining soil health, productivity losses, and long-term farm profitability.

Resource Concerns Identified Contd

Translated to NRCS Resource Concerns:

- Degraded Plant Condition
- Soil Quality Limitations
- Livestock Production Limitations
- Wind and Water Erosion
- Terrestrial Habitat Degradation

Primary Conservation Practices

Alleycropping

Silvopasture

Forest Farming

Riparian Forest Buffer

Hedgerow Planting

Windbreak & Shelterbelt

Financial Assistance Model

Funding Strategy and Cost Structure

Key Elements:

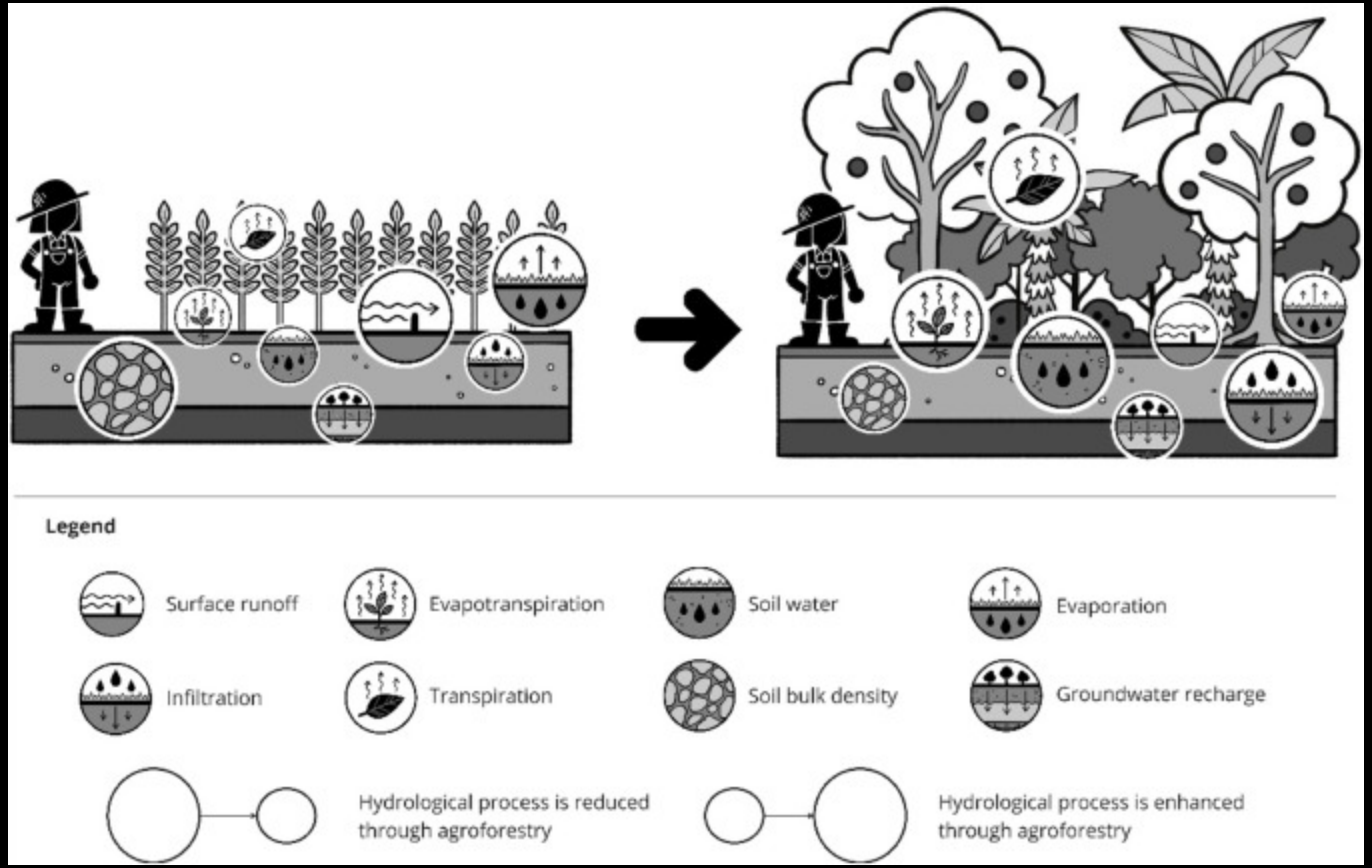
- **Per-acre costs:** $3,001 to $32,497 depending on practice type
- **Total estimated project cost:** $3 million to $10.5 million: Proposed 1 million per year for year 1-3
- **Cost-share layering:** Combine federal, state, and local matches to reduce landowner burden
- **Focus:** Maximize impact per dollar by prioritizing flood-prone, high-risk, and productive lands

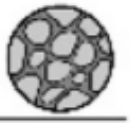
Administration and Management

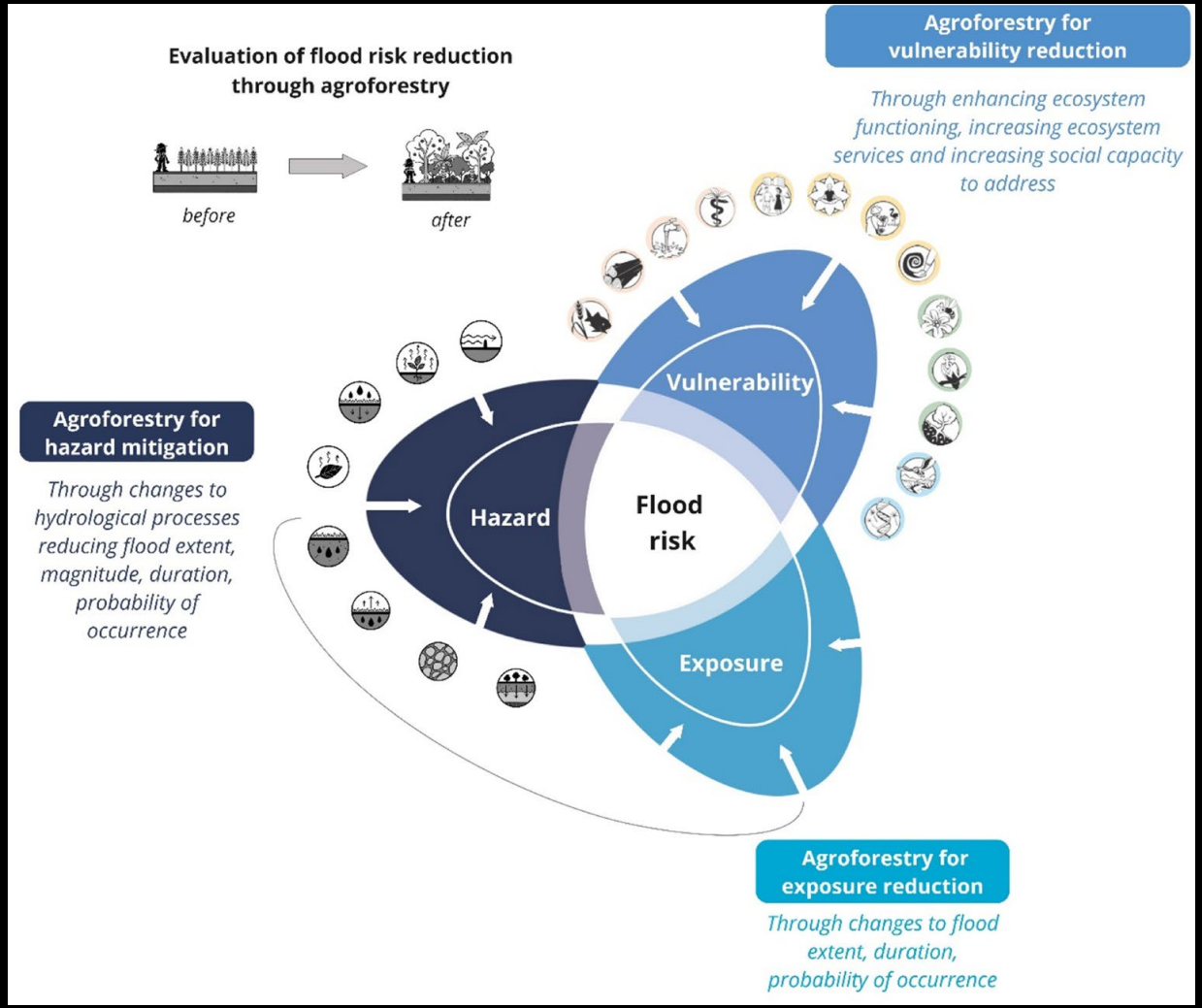
Key Elements:

- **BCCD to lead coordination and reporting**
- **NRCS to provide technical standards and verification**
- **Financial tracking aligned with federal grant management best practices**
- **Adaptive reallocation of funds based on enrollment and performance**

Why Agroforestry?


Legend
Surface runoff
Evapotranspiration
Soil water
Evaporation
Infiltration
Transpiration
Soil bulk density
Groundwater recharge
Hydrological process is reduced through agroforestry
Hydrological process is enhanced through agroforestry

								
Direction	decrease	increase	increase	decrease	mostly increase	decrease	mostly increase	mostly decrease
Range (%)	(-4) to (-80)	138 to 286	0 to 21	(-3) to (-9)	(-90) to 60	(-2) to (-20)	(-102) to 58	(-23) to 20
Median	-22,5	222	2	-5	5	-6,75	5,7	-5,15
Standard deviation	31,1	56,25	7,1	2,01	48,0	6,47	38,08	15,48


Evaluation of flood risk reduction through agroforestry
before
after
Agroforestry for vulnerability reduction
Through enhancing ecosystem functioning, increasing ecosystem services and increasing social capacity to address
Agroforestry for hazard mitigation
Through changes to hydrological processes reducing flood extent, magnitude, duration, probability of occurrence
Vulnerability
Hazard
Flood risk
Exposure
Agroforestry for exposure reduction
Through changes to flood extent, duration, probability of occurrence

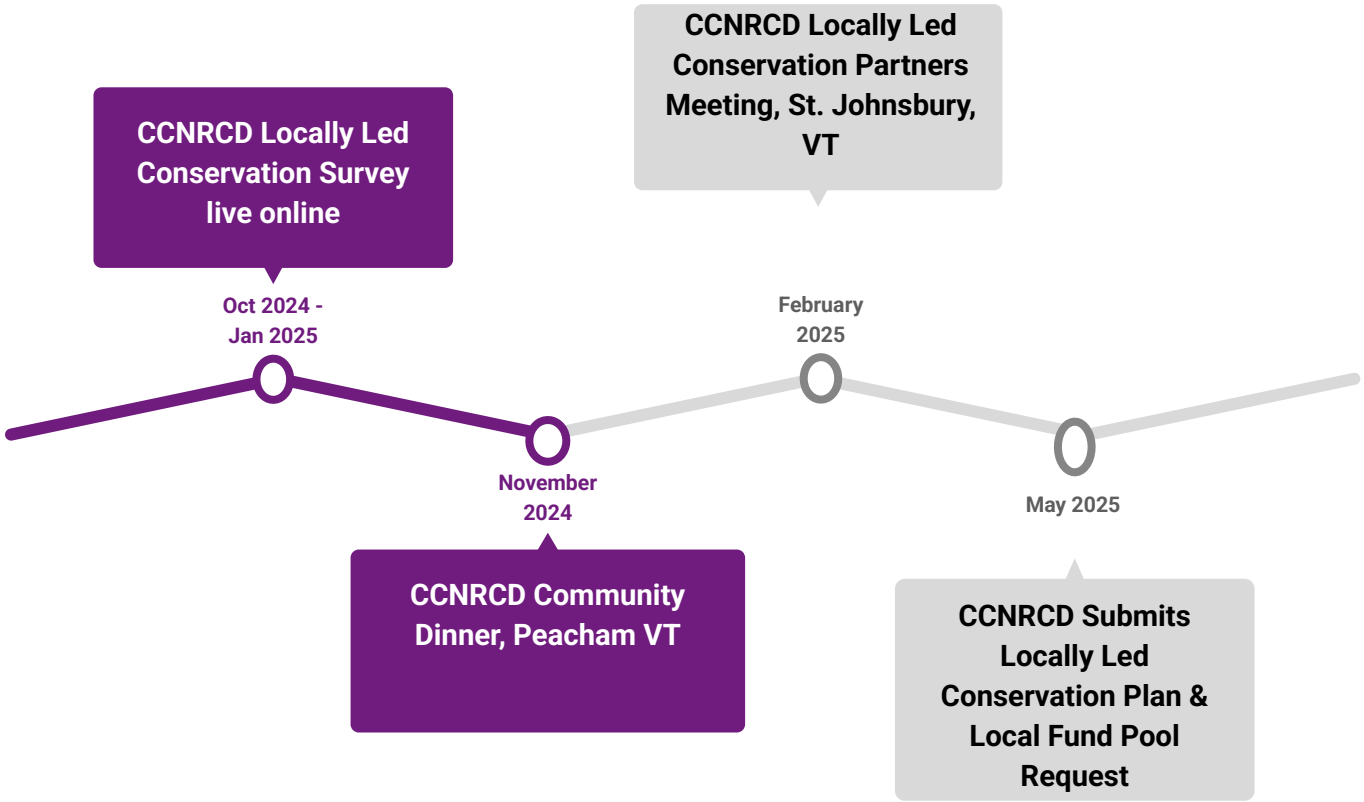
THANK YOU

Any questions?

Locally Led Conservation in Caledonia County

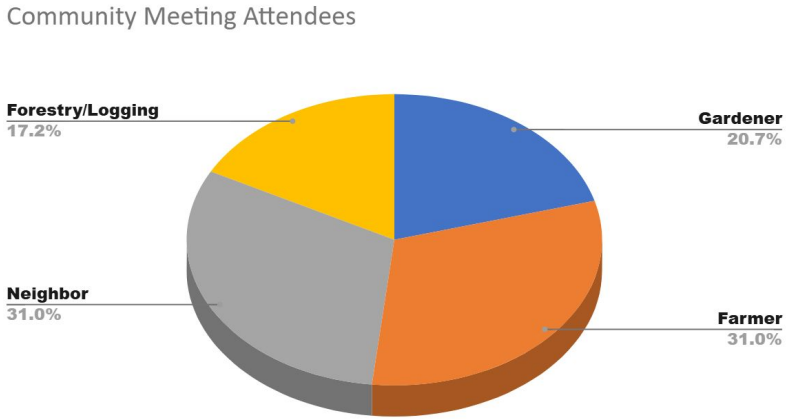
Caledonia County Natural Resources Conservation District
2024-2025

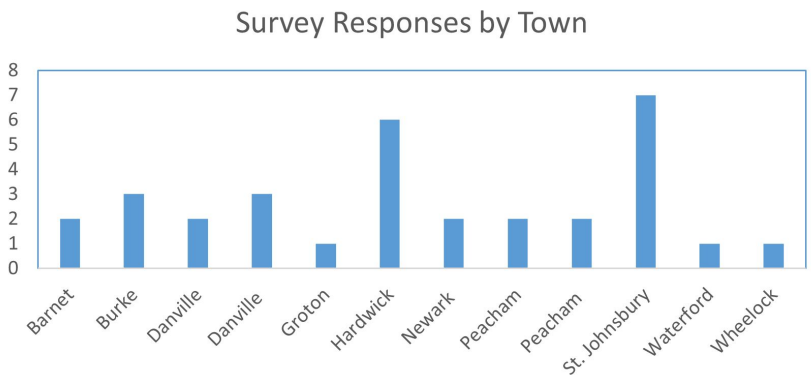
Timeline


CCNRCD Locally Led Conservation Survey live online
Oct 2024 - Jan 2025
CCNRCD Locally Led Conservation Partners Meeting, St. Johnsbury, VT
February 2025
November 2024
CCNRCD Community Dinner, Peacham VT
May 2025
CCNRCD Submits Locally Led Conservation Plan & Local Fund Pool Request

Community Needs Assessment

- 51 Survey Responses
- 21 questions, online
- 31 Households at November Community Meeting
- 3 questions & discussion, in person
- Demographic Data Collected
- Focus: Local Fund Pool, Conservation Action Plan, & District Services





Q2 - Vision for Agriculture & Food Security

Local food in abundance

Land access for young farmers

Financial & market support for small, regenerative farms

Peer support for home scale gardening

Community gardens & collective food processing spaces

Open spaces in production

Q3 - Vision for Natural Resources & the Environment

Clean water, air, and energy

Clustered development & smart growth

Rural areas remain open, large parcels remain intact

Contiguous forest tracts/ wildlife corridors

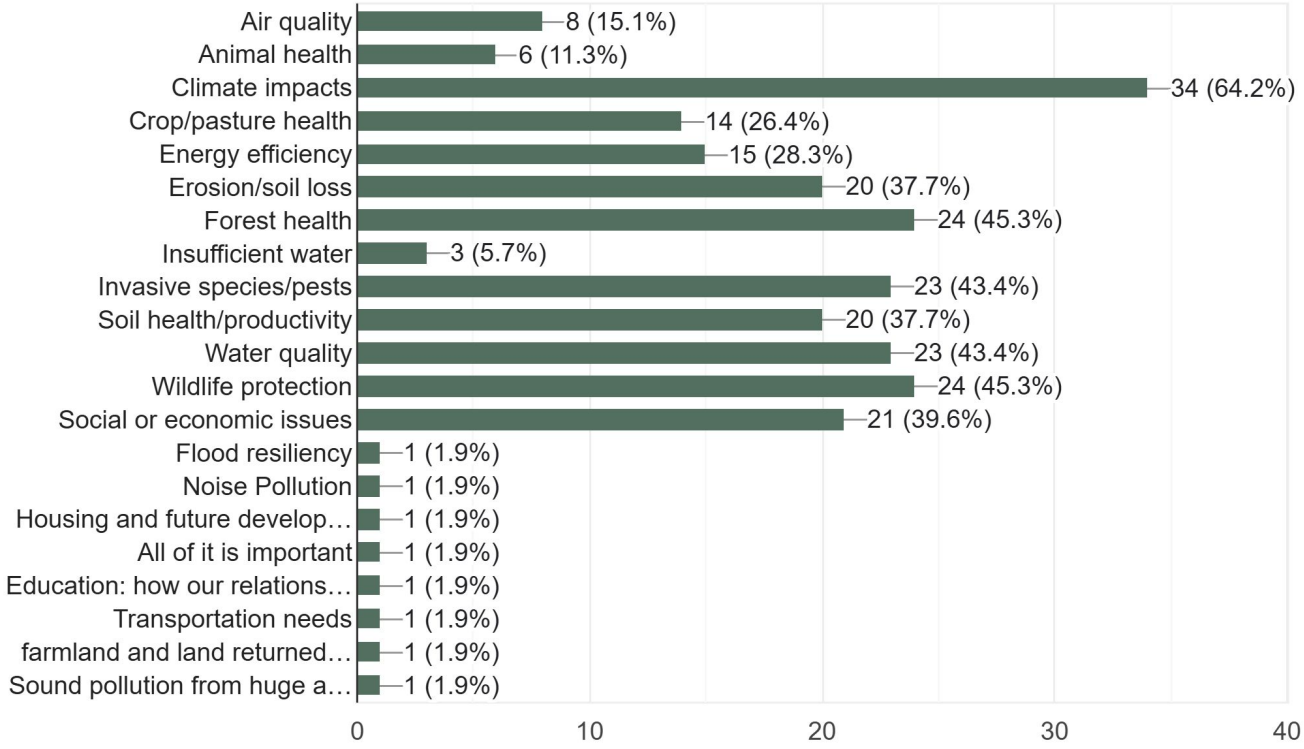
Community engagement in invasives control & responsible land management

Robust environmental education opportunities for the public

Climate change resiliency

When it comes to natural resources and agricultural issues in Caledonia County, what concerns you the most?

53 responses



Q5 – Resource Concern Details

Climate Impacts (Ranked 1st)
More **frequent flooding**, **changing weather** patterns, and other broad environmental consequences that **affect everyone**.

Forest Health (Ranked 2nd)
Contiguous forests central to wildlife, pollinator, and ecosystem health while maintaining cultural identity/ rural character. Concerns about **invasive species** threatening forest resilience.

Wildlife Protection (Ranked 3rd)
Habitat fragmentation and land management choices (e.g., **logging**) impacts to wildlife linked to broader health of the environment. Negative impacts affect identity, **cultural values**, and sense of place.

Water Quality (Ranked 4th)
Connection to both environmental health (e.g**., runoff from farms and salted roads**) and the need for clean drinking water and pristine recreation. Concerns about **flooding** and subsequent water contamination.

Invasive Species/Pests (Ranked 5th)
Rapid and destructive impacts on local biodiversity with costly solutions. **Addressing them proactively** is viewed as essential to maintaining ecosystem balance, especially as climate change alters species dynamics.

Social or Economic Issues (Ranked 6th**)
Social and economic issues deeply tied to environmental concerns, particularly **housing affordability**, **farmland access, policies impacting development/ zoning, community services, taxes and incentives,** and the **cost of living**.

Soil Health (Ranked 7th)
Concerns about contamination due to agricultural **chemicals** and **plastics**, as well as depleted soils with poor infiltration.

Erosion/Soil Loss (Ranked 8th)
Impact on **agriculture**, long-term health of local ecosystems. environmental management practices, such as **conventional tillage, roads, flooding, and development**.

CCNRCD Locally Led Conservation Proposal

1. High Tunnel System
2. Conservation Cover
3. Irrigation Water Management
4. Soil Carbon Amendment
5. Low Tunnel Systems

Appendix F – Local Work Group (LWG) Feedback Form
Essex County NRCD - May 2025

Feedback and Recommendations to NRCS:

1. *Natural Resource Conservation Priorities for the LWG area (top 3 natural resource priorities):*

The top three priority resource issues identified during our local working group process (public meeting, survey, partner discussion) were water quality, climate change, and social and economic challenges.

Water Quality: Participants were concerned about the protection of Essex County's high-quality lakes and forested headwaters and the improvement of degraded water bodies (most notably the Connecticut River). Addressing nutrient and sediment loading in lakes and streams from agricultural, forested, and developed land was a priority for most participants. Associated NRCS resource concerns include nutrient transport to surface water, sediment transport to surface water, sheet and rill erosion, gully erosion, and bank erosion. Participants also identified the loss of suitable aquatic habitat for native fish, particularly salmonids, and the spread of aquatic invasive species as areas of significant natural resource concern. There was significant interest in restoration of degraded or drained wetland and floodplain, particularly along the main stem of the Connecticut River and along important tributaries, as a vehicle to restore and protect water quality. Forestry water quality practices (improvement of forest roads and trails, better trails management in sugarbushes, improved crossings for timber harvest and sugaring access) were priorities given the largely forested landscape of Essex County.

Climate Change and Increased Storm Severity: Participants were highly concerned about preparation for and resilience from extreme precipitation events and flooding. Participants cited concerns about ecosystem damage, erosion and sediment loss, damage to property and public and private infrastructure, loss of crops and decreased production for farmers and other working lands enterprises, and water quality issues from floodwaters. Associated NRCS resource concerns include nutrient transport to surface water, sediment transport to surface water, gully erosion, sheet and rill erosion, bank erosion, pathogens and chemicals transported to surface water, and other pollutants transported to surface water. Soil health and livestock-related resource concerns caused directly by extreme precipitation events were major areas of concern. Damages to forest roads and trails that are critical to forestry and sugaring operations, and the damage to the forested headwaters that protect the relatively high water quality in much of Essex County were key issues. Participants also discussed the potential spread of invasive plants as a result of climate change and challenges for agricultural producers from changing growing seasons and precipitation patterns.

Social and Economic: The most critical social and economic issues participants identified were working lands business viability (particularly farm viability), loss of skills and labor from economically disadvantaged rural areas, loss of rural culture and community, and rising costs of

production and processing for most agricultural and timber products. Participants were concerned about the extractive nature of large-scale agricultural and forestry operations and the relative lack of benefit of these operations to the local economy. There was extensive discussion in both meetings and surveys about the future of the industrial forest products economy in Essex County, and landscape scale impacts of both continued operations and loss of this land management. Participants felt that it is important to maintain and support the viability of small-scale working lands enterprises, and that such enterprises have a larger cultural and economic benefit to Essex County. Participants discussed how best to balance recreation-based and working lands economies, especially on parcels where both forms of land use exist.

2. *Key conservation partners for the LWG area:*

USDA FSA and NRCS, USFWS, VAAFM, VT ANR (DEC, FPR, Fish and Wildlife), Orleans, Caledonia, and Coos County NRCDs, Connecticut River Conservancy, Northwoods Stewardship Center, Memphremagog Watershed Association, VHCB, NVDA, Connecticut River Watershed Farmers Alliance, UVM Extension, lake associations, snowmobile clubs

3. *General conservation program recommendations:*

If Forest Management Plan (CPA 106)/Forest Management Practice Design (DIA 165) are in an Act Now EQIP pool, it would be ideal to align timing with Vermont UVA timeline to allow clients to apply for FMP funding the summer/fall prior to their required update. Many clients are not aware of their update timing, and consulting foresters do not always conduct outreach to clients prior to the update year.

4. *General conservation planning business tool recommendations:*

None.

5. *Conservation Program payment schedule recommendations:*

For Herbaceous Weed Treatment (315)/Brush Management (314), a separate payment scenario for small-scale treatment (for example, under 5 ac) at a higher per acre rate may make it more financially feasible for clients to plan and conduct small-scale invasive plant control. At current rates, small-acreage invasive plant control is not feasible as payment does not approach the market cost of hiring a contractor.

6. *General Conservation Practice Standard (CPS) feedback*

The Conservation Practice Standard for Forest Trails and Landings (655) can be difficult to apply appropriately on land managed for sugaring, rather than conventional timber harvesting. If possible, we would suggest considering a scenario for 655 that better meets the needs of sugarbush operators (repeated access during sensitive times of year, annual access vs. once every several years) while addressing the associated resource concerns (gully erosion, sediment transport to surface waters).

7. *Any Interim CPS recommendations?*

None.

8. *Please list the LWG top ten (10) High Priority Conservation Practices (these practices receive a higher payment rate in EQIP):*

Cropland: Cover Crop (340), Residue Management - No-Till / Reduced Till (329/345)
Pasture: Fence (382), Prescribed Grazing (528)
Farmstead: Energy Efficient Farm Operation (374), Composting Facility (317)
Forest: Forest Trails and Landings (655), Riparian Buffer Planting (391), Timber Stand Improvement (666), Herbaceous Weed Control (315)

9. *Technical training needs:*

We believe the following topics would be useful technical training topics for planners in our region: wetland restoration, general forestry topics (both forest stand management and forestry water quality), cover crop implementation strategies for short growing seasons, alleviating compaction on hayland and cropland.

10. *Are there any specific Conservation Innovation Grant (CIG) topics that NRCS should invest in for future years?*

Essex County NRCD is working with partners on a project to explore the possibility of using mycoremediation to treat excess nutrients in agricultural runoff. As this project develops further, we may consider applying for a CIG. We are also working on developing local production of materials for restoration projects (nursery production of bare root trees, perennials, willow fascines and stakes) and believe this could be a valuable CIG investment.

11. *What current investments (projects or state-wide fund pools) are working well and are gathering long-term data needs that NRCS should continue to invest in moving forward? Please be specific.*

No information gathered through LWG process (relatively little feedback from current NRCS participants).

12. *Other recommendations not captured above:*

None.

Franklin County
Natural Resources
Conservation District

$2 Million
Franklin County
Farmstead and
Infrastructure Pool

Locally Led Funding Pool Request

- Request: $2 million for Farmstead and Infrastructure Projects in Franklin County
- Farms are facing:
  - Rising economic instability
  - Weakening agricultural economy
  - Increased and changing regulations
- Without support, many farms in Franklin County (mostly dairy) risk falling behind on these upgrades, which could jeopardize water quality and farm productivity.

- To address this, we propose a dedicated NRCS funding pool for FY26 to help farmers overcome financial barriers and implement infrastructure improvements that support regulatory compliance, operational sustainability, and water quality protection, while strengthening the local agricultural economy.

Key Partners in Franklin County

- USDA-NRCS
- ANR-DEC
- ANR-FPR
- VAAFM
- UVM Extension
- Vermont Fish & Wildlife
- US Fish and Wildlife Service
- Vermont Housing & Conservation Board
- Lake Champlain Basin Program
- Northwest Regional Planning Commission
- Missisquoi River Basin Association
- Upper Missisquoi and Trout Rivers Wild & Scenic Committee
- Friends of Northern Lake Champlain
- Franklin Watershed Committee
- Cold Hollow to Canada

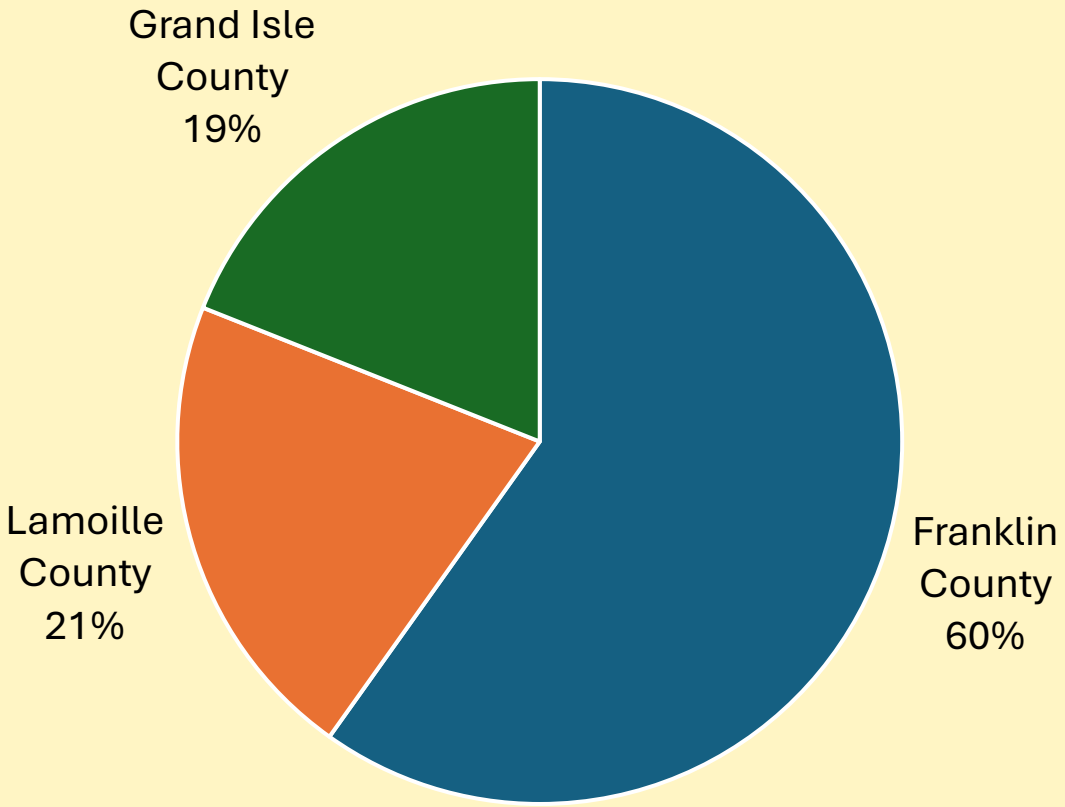
Scope of Locally Led Process

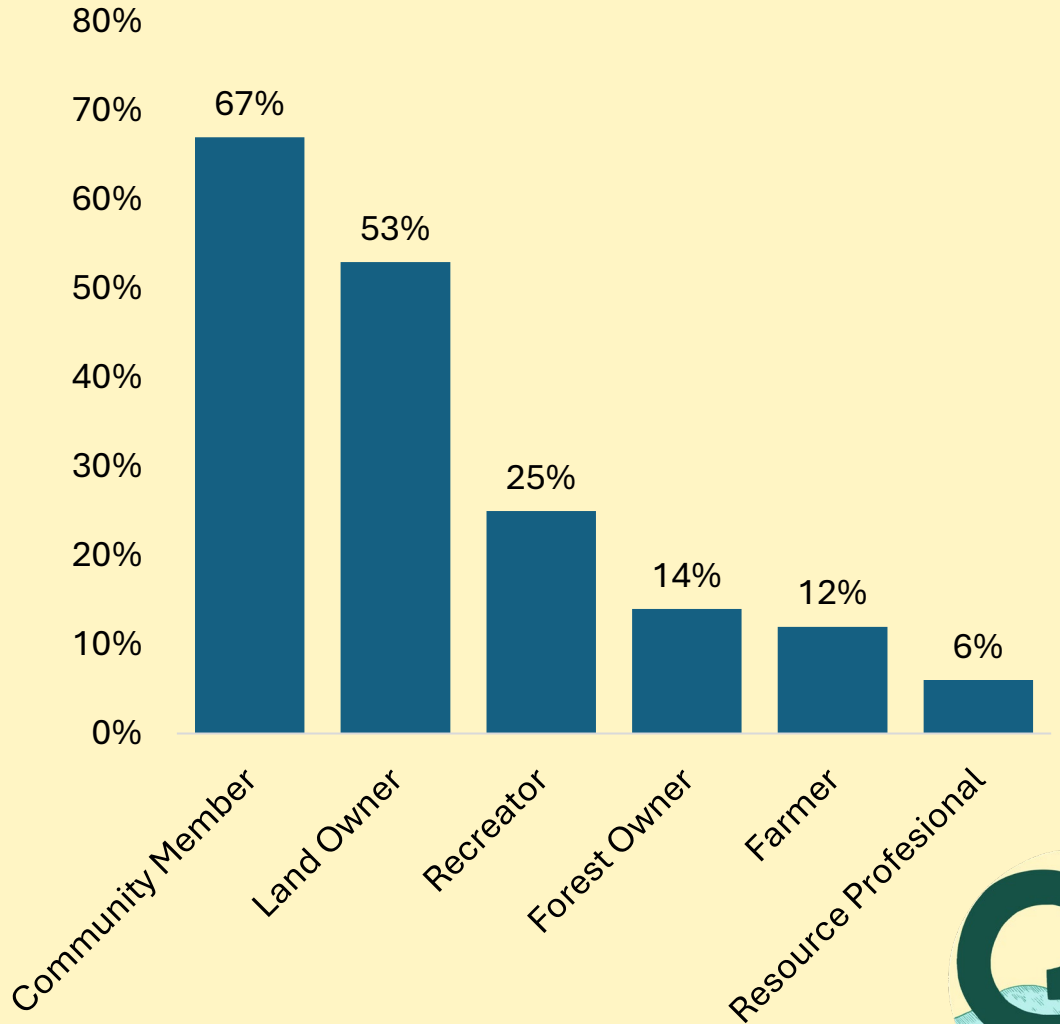
Hours: 350+ at FCNRCD

Additional Supporting Documents Included:

- February 6, 2025 Local Working Group Meeting Notes
- August 14, 2024 Locally Led Community Meeting Notes - St. Albans
- January 21, 2025 Locally Led Community Meeting Notes - North Hero
- Franklin County Conservation Needs Assessment
- Locally Led Conservation Survey Results - 140 respondents across NW Zone
- Franklin County NRCD Mail – Local Funding Pool Options (Board Feedback)
- March 19, 2025 FCNRCD Board Meeting Minutes
- May 6, 2025 Email Communication with Travis Thomason re: exceeding the 5 practice limit

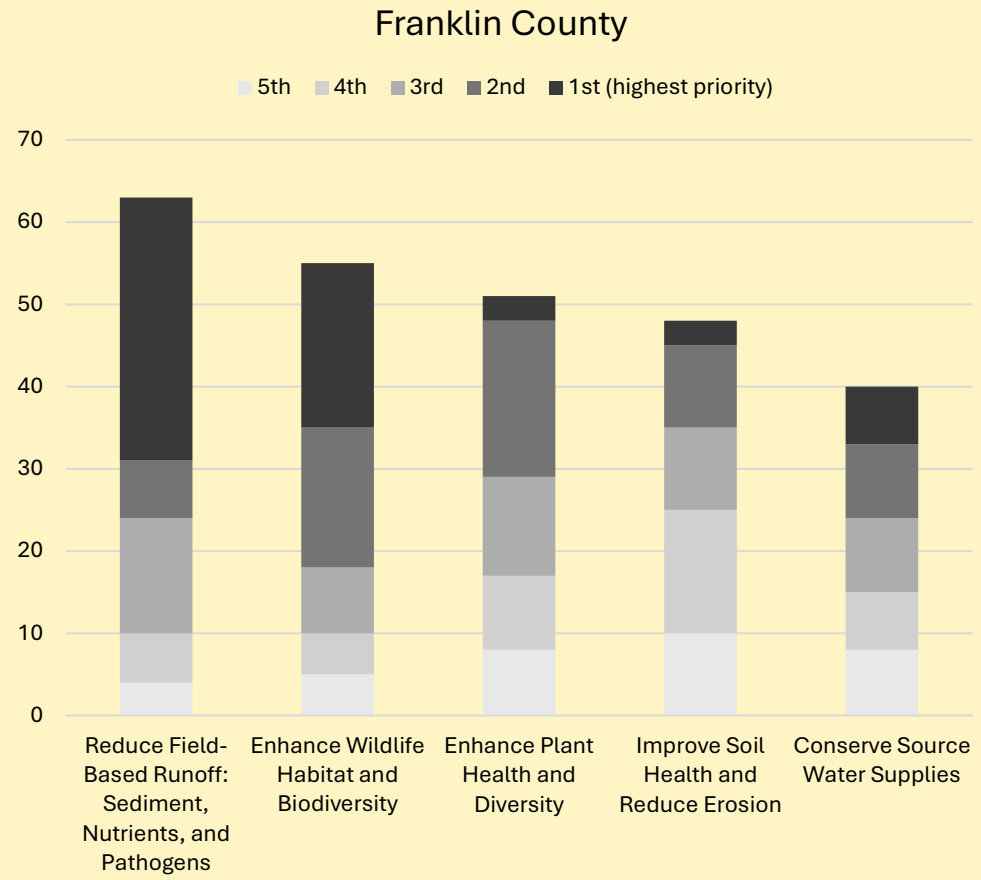
Survey Respondents – 140+ responses

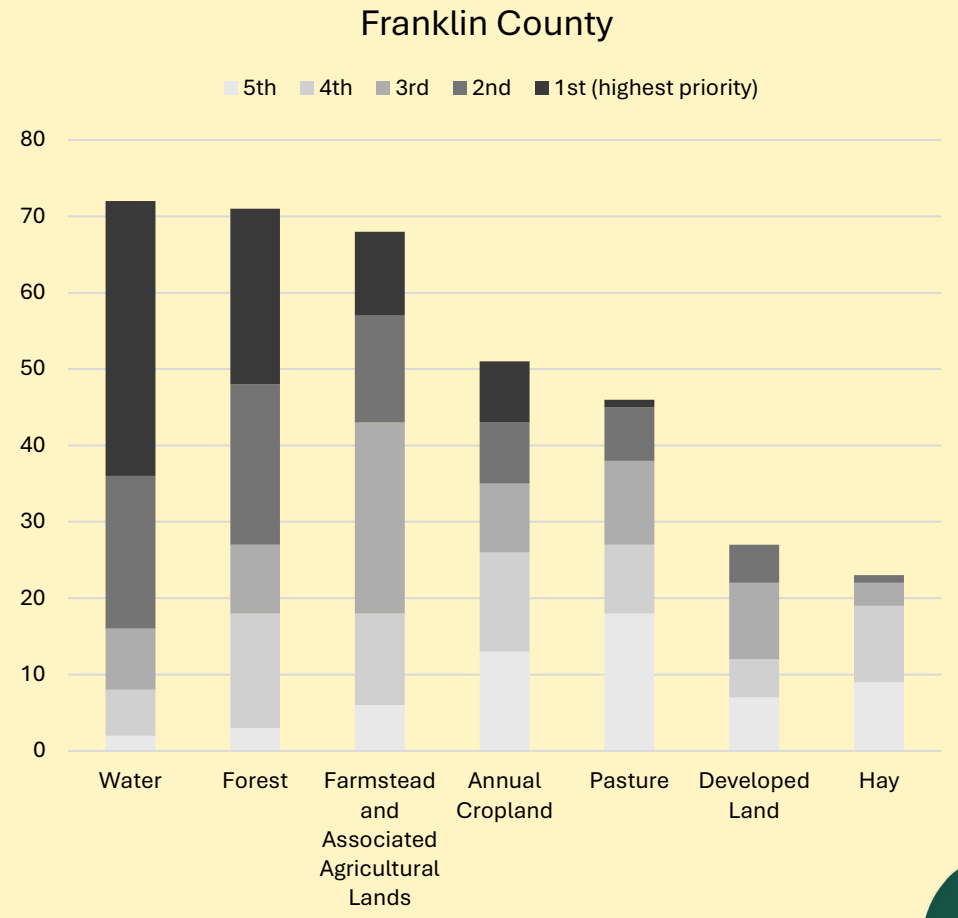




What People Love vs Barriers to Solutions

Franklin County Specific Results





LWG Feedback

- Prioritize working with farms that have received corrective letters from the state and/or are part of Farm Teams/coordination with multiple agencies to address problems because it's challenging to split up work between funders and then not have NRCS-scheduled projects rank high enough for funding.
- Conservation practices are threatened by the worsening bottom line of economic viability for farms.
- Continue to update based on actual Vermont experiences – collect information from farmers on expenses to create payment schedule that is locally adapted and accurate.
- Pay for as much of an actual practice cost as possible.
- Additional Engineering Training Opportunities to increase EJAA among NRCS staff and partners.

Why Farmstead + Infrastructure

- Addressing “Reduce Field Based Runoff: Sediment, Nutrients, and Pathogens” starts with ensuring farms have the infrastructure necessary to properly manage nutrients.

- Adequate manure and nutrient storage facilities are critical for timing field applications that minimize runoff risk in accordance with Nutrient Management Plans, regulatory requirements, and weather conditions.

- Given NRCS’s focus on supporting agricultural producers, the Franklin County Natural Resources Conservation District (FCNRCD) concluded that Farmstead and Associated Agricultural Lands represent the most appropriate local target for NRCS technical and financial assistance, particularly through the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP).

- This proposal builds directly from the community’s vision, as described in the Franklin County Conservation Action Plan, which calls for **economically viable farms, sustainable local agriculture, food sovereignty, preserved farmland, and environmental stewardship**. By addressing pressing farmstead infrastructure challenges, this initiative aims to move the county closer to that vision—**supporting both agricultural productivity and clean water across the landscape**.

Why $2 Million

- 10 applications for farmstead infrastructure in the NRCS pipeline, representing $2,064,819.56 in potential funding.
- Of these, the top 8 projects, which align most closely with the $2 million funding request, cover approximately 40 acres of agricultural land.

This targeted group will serve as an initial focus for this strategy, providing a clear path for prioritizing investments that deliver the greatest environmental benefit and economic impact within the available funding window.

SMART Goals

- **Specific:** Support at least 8 of the 10 Franklin County landowners currently with farmstead applications in the NRCS pipeline, as well as any additional applications, to implement farmstead infrastructure improvements that reduce nutrient and pathogen runoff over the next 3-5 years (average project timeline).
- **Measurable:**
  - Number of EQIP contracts established
  - Number of infrastructure projects completed
  - Total funding obligated
  - Track environmental outcomes through number of farms improving compliance standing with VAAFM and additional storage for waste and manure
- **Achievable:** Prioritize practices that are feasible for the size of the operation, and those that support compliance with Vermont's RAPs, while providing targeted technical and financial assistance to address known resource concerns.
- **Relevant:** Farmstead improvements are needed to meet regional water quality goals and to improve the health of the Missisquoi Bay, Lamoille River, and Northern Lake Champlain watersheds and economic viability of farms in Franklin County.
- **Time-Bound:** Contracts are anticipated to be signed in FY26, with producers likely committing to 3-5 year contracts, aligning with typical EQIP funding cycles and providing adequate time for infrastructure installatio and environmental outcomes.

35 NRCS Practices Requested

101: CNMP Design and Implementation Activity
102: Comprehensive Nutrient Management Plan
157: Nutrient Management Design and Implementation Activity
313: Waste Storage Facility
316: Animal Mortality Facility
317: Composting Facility
342: Critical Area Planting
360: Waste Facility Closure
362: Diversion
367: Roofs and Covers
382: Fence
484: Mulching
500: Obstruction Removal
516: Livestock Pipeline
520: Pond Sealing or Lining, Compacted Soil Treatment
521: Pond Sealing or Lining, Geomembrane or Geosynthetic Clay Liner
522: Pond Sealing or Lining – Concrete
533: Plumbing Plant
558: Roof Runoff Structure
560: Access Road
561: Heavy Use Protection Area
570: Stormwater Runoff Control
574: Spring Development
575: Trails and Walkways
576: Livestock Shelter Structure
578: Stream Crossing
590: Nutrient Management
606: Subsurface Drain
614: Watering Facility
620: Underground Outlet
627: Wastewater Treatment – Milk House
629: Waste Treatment
632: Waste Separation Facility
634: Waste Transfer
642: Water Well

Ranking Questions & Prioritization

- **Program Questions**
  - Is the applicant enrolled in CRP-TIP?
  - Has the application previously been deferred?
  - Is the producer working with other agencies for project funding?
  - Does this application address a corrective action?
  - Is the MWWHP in progress, at least 20-25% completed?
- **Resource Questions**
  - Does this application benefit water quality?
  - Does this application include a farmstead practice?
  - Does this application correct a direct discharge?

Engineering Workload Options

1. The preferred option is that applications that have already been under development by **NRCS engineers** and planners are the priority-funded applications. Many of these applications have several steps of engineering design completed previously by NRCS engineers, including manure wastewater handling plans. The goal would be for NRCS Engineers to continue to work on these projects.
2. **TSP Engineering Funds:** There are potentially TSP engineering funds available. It is our understanding that these can be included as line items within NRCS contracts, which count against the $450k Farm Bill cap, or through A&E TSPs, which are not embedded in a participant's EQIP and do not impact a producer's Farm Bill limit. These funds are paid directly to engineers through NRCS.
3. **Third-Party Engineers:** Producers have the option to hire third-party engineers independently with their own funds, provided the engineer holds a Vermont Professional Engineer (PE) stamp.

Given that many of the projects targeted for this funding pool are already in the NRCS pipeline, much of the necessary engineering work has already been completed or is in progress, reducing the overall design burden for new applicants. For projects that are not in the NRCS existing workload, cannot access outside engineers, and are still prioritized by this pool, it is expected that this workload would be incorporated into NRCS engineer workload in future years when capacity is available.

Questions?

Franklin County NRCD

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Orenna Brand – Orenna@FranklinCountyNRCD.org

802-582-3133

USDA-NRCS

Sarah Larose – Sarah.Larose@usda.gov

LOCALLY LED
CONSERVATION PLAN

MAY 2025

GRAND ISLE COUNTY
NATURAL RESOURCES
CONSERVATION DISTRICT

THE VISION FOR GRAND ISLE COUNTY

Sustainable agricultural practices to reduce environmental impact

Land remaining in agricultural use

Viable, resilient farms that support the community

Clean water for recreation, consumption, wildlife, and more

CONSERVATION NEED

The goal is to improve soil health across Grand Isle County by promoting agronomic practices that enhance soil structure, reduce erosion, increase organic matter, and provide water quality protections.

CONSERVATION PRACTICES

1. Cover Crop
2. Pasture and Hay Planting
3. Residue and Tillage Management, Reduced Till
4. Residue and Tillage Management, No-Till
5. Soil Carbon Amendment
6. Mulching
7. Integrated Pest Management
8. High Tunnel System
9. Nutrient Management
10. Conservation Crop Rotation

TIMELINE

SUMMER 2025

Outreach to landowners.

SPRING 2026

Contracts signed with participating landowners.

FALL 2026 - SPRING 2027

Initial practice implementation based on crop schedule and agronomic needs.

2027 – 2031 (3-5 YEARS)

Ongoing annual practice implementation, adapting to seasonal variations and crop cycles.

POST IMPLEMENTATION 30 DAYS TO 1 YEAR

Contract expiration based on final practice completion.

THANK YOU!

Molly Varner, District Manager
Grand Isle County Natural Resources Conservation District
molly@grandislecountynrcd.org | grandislecountynrcd.org

Lamoille County Conservation District - FY26 LLCD Proposal

Problem Statement/Need:

Resource Concerns

- Terrestrial Habitat
- Pest Pressure
- Degraded Plant Condition
- Concentrated Erosion
- Aquatic Habitat

Survey and Local Work Group Feedback

- Protect natural resources while investing in local products and food production
- Lamoille County is 80% forested and the economy is based largely on tourism and recreation, particularly forest-based (i.e. skiing, fall foliage, maple syrup)
- One-third of survey respondents identified forests as the highest priority land use
- Half of survey respondents identified forests as second highest priority land use

Challenges

- Majority of forestland is privately owned
- Economics, development pressure, and invasive species are causing increased forest fragmentation and declining forest health
- This can lead to an increase in flooding and erosion; decrease in water quality, habitat, biodiversity, and resilience; loss of economic potential

Project Area:

- All of Lamoille County (Waterville, Belvidere, Eden, Cambridge, Johnson, Hyde Park, Morristown, Wolcott, Elmore, Stowe)
- In addition to addressing the backlog of past applicants, we are requesting $120,000 to support 10 new landowners who might not otherwise have access to or awareness of NRCS programs

Core Conservation Practices:

- 655: Forest Trails and Landings
- 645: Upland Wildlife Habitat Management
- 666: Forest Stand Improvement
- 314 + 315: Brush Management and Herbaceous Weed Treatment
- 106 + 165: Forest Management Plan and Practice Design

Timeline of Implementation:

- LCCD will prioritize outreach to forest landowners through community events such as meetings, forums, and Lamoille County Field Days, and sharing of the Accepted Management Practices (AMPs)
- Landowners will work with NRCS Planner for funding and implementation; timeline will depend upon the project length, size, and practice, TBD by the Planner
- LCCD will provide support by visiting the site once a year for 3-5 years (depending on the scale) after the contract ends and sharing findings with the Planner

White River
Natural
Resources
Conservation
District

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White River Junction, VT 05001
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FY2026 White River / Ottauquechee Local Working Group Report

Presented to the Vermont State Technical Committee - May 15, 2025

Table of Contents

Introduction and Methods

The White River and Ottauquechee (WR/O) Local Working Group, chaired by the White River Natural Resources Conservation District (NRCD), in collaboration with the Ottauquechee NRCD, submits this proposal in response to the FY2025 Locally Led Conservation Delivery (LLCD) Request for Proposals (RFP) issued by the Vermont State Office of the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS). This report synthesizes extensive community-based input, technical assessments, and planning frameworks into a unified Locally Led Conservation Plan (LLCP) aimed at addressing priority natural resource concerns in east-central Vermont.

In May 2025, the Local Funding Pool Request included at the end of this report, was discussed and approved by the White River and Ottauquechee Conservation District Boards of Supervisors. In addition, the relevant District Conservationists at NRCS offered the following statement of support:

> "After reviewing the local fund pool proposal that was presented by the White River Junction NRCD, both District Conservationists of the NE and South Zones felt that the proposal set the agricultural community up for future success. Fiscal Year 26 local fund pool, the prioritization is to assist the community with providing technical assistance to the community. This proposal will meet those goals by providing producers the opportunity to implement CPAs, DIAs, and CEMAs. This will allow for the producer to continue with moving forward with what is recommended in the plan in FY 27. Long term this will set the producer up for success to continue with planning first followed by assisting and implementing practices recommended in the plan."

The priorities and strategies presented herein are the result of a multi-year, multi-method data collection effort coordinated through the WR/O Local Working Group (LWG) process. In general, the recommendations reflect a strong desire for USDA programs to be more accessible, inclusive, flexible, and adaptive—rooted in the needs of local communities and guided by the experience of farmers and conservation professionals on the ground. Specifically, data and insights were gathered through:

1. **Annual Local Work Group Meetings (2021–2025):**
    - Facilitated in-person and virtual meetings engaging farmers, forest landowners, conservation professionals, and NRCS staff.
    - Agendas designed to elicit input on natural resource concerns, program experiences, and local priorities.
    - Notes, discussion transcripts, and de-identified quotes were analyzed to identify themes and repeated recommendations.

2. **Producer Surveys and Interviews:**
    - Annual outreach surveys conducted from 2022-2025 reached over 100 respondents.
    - Surveys included multiple-choice and open-ended questions focused on experiences with state and federal conservation programs, priority resource concerns, and technical assistance needs.
    - Follow-up interviews and informal conversations were held with producers representing a variety of farm scales and systems (e.g., dairy, vegetable, livestock, agroforestry).
3. **Focus Groups and Public Comment:**
    - Focus groups were held across the state, leading to this report on farmer and agricultural service provider's perspectives on payment for ecosystem services programs.
    - The District also collected written comments on NRCS program accessibility and technical assistance barriers through community engagement events and one-on-one support sessions.
4. **Partner Consultation and Alignment:**
    - Coordination with state and regional agencies, including the Vermont Agency of Agriculture, Food and Markets (VAAFM), Department of Environmental Conservation (VT-DEC), UVM Extension, Connecticut River Watershed Farmers Alliance (CRWFA), and the Vermont Association of Conservation Districts (VACD).
    - Cross-referencing findings with Vermont's Clean Water Initiative priorities, state-level conservation planning efforts, and federal Farm Bill guidance.
5. **Review of Past Reports and Outcomes:**
    - The team conducted a comparative analysis of recommendations and investments made in FY2023 and FY2024 and FY2025 local funding pools, tracking participation, under-subscription, and impact.
    - Integrated feedback from past EQIP, CSP, and RCPP participants as documented in local NRCD records and reports.

This inclusive, iterative approach has allowed the WR/O Local Working Group to identify key barriers and opportunities for advancing conservation in our watersheds. The recommendations and implementation strategies that follow are rooted in the lived experiences of farmers and land stewards, and reflect a strong consensus among partners on the need for flexible, holistic, and locally-driven solutions.

Issues and Recommendations

This section outlines a set of key issues and recommendations generated through our multi-year Locally Led Conservation process. These insights reflect the lived experiences of farmers, landowners, technical assistance providers, and conservation partners who engage regularly with NRCS programs. Each recommendation is grounded in local data, public input, and field-level implementation experience, offering practical strategies to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of conservation delivery in our region. We recognize that many elements in the numbered recommendations are structural and built into the National Programs as a result of USDA program managers' responses to Congressional directives, and so not immediately remediable by State Office actions. Therefore, we are requesting that VT-NRCS officers work with Congressional and Headquarters staff to improve these issues and make Programs more user-friendly.

We offer the following broad priority recommendations:

National Policy & procedures:

1) Increase utilization (funding) of CSP and EQIP-CIC to reward participants for good conservation practices, rather than traditional EQIP to address existing Resource Concerns.
2) Add an Advance Payment option to RCPP - Regional Conservation Partnership Programs.
3) Allow NRCS Regional or State Offices to create locally-appropriate CSP Enhancements or Bundles.

Vermont and regional implementation:

1) Improve communication and coordination between local FSA and NRCS offices so that participants get timely explanation and follow-up on eligibility documentation.
2) Review available Practice Scenarios and add additional ones appropriate to smaller-scale and diversified farms. Build flexibility into practice scenarios to encourage farmer innovation.
3) Increase training of NRCS and Partner staff on non-traditional regenerative agricultural Practices including agroforestry, so that staff can promote and assist implementation of these Practices. Reduce emphasis on cover crop and no-till as conservation solutions.
4) Allow CSP and AMA to be included in Local Funding Pools.

1. Streamline and Simplify Programs

Issues:

- Farmers are overwhelmed by complex application processes, inconsistent deadlines, and redundant paperwork across federal and state conservation programs.
- Diversified and small farms often struggle to access programs that are designed with commodity-scale farms in mind.
- Overly complex and confusing application and eligibility processes
- Redundant paperwork across multiple programs
- Inconsistent definitions among USDA agencies (e.g., for historically underserved, beginning and veteran farmers)
- Poor outreach and low awareness of available programs
- Multiple forms required for single applicants; misalignment of application deadlines with farming timelines

Recommendations:

- Streamline forms and deadlines.
- Create unified "one stop shop" application portal across fund pools, programs, and agencies.
- Align deadlines and contract timelines with seasonal farming realities, especially for cover crops and diversified systems.
- Develop a user-friendly, centralized access point for farmers to learn about and apply to all programs. Allow farmers to identify interests/conservation plan elements to be notified when an applicable grant becomes available. Utilize and provide training for use of farmers.gov portal.
- Increase transparency and timely feedback loops so farmers know when and why they were or were not selected for funding.
- Use multiple direct communications (calls, texts, mail) rather than email or mail only
- Increase outreach and education efforts (e.g., service provider lists, classroom programs)
- Eliminate redundant data entry across multiple NRCS tools (e.g., CART, CD, ProTracts).
- Improve contract language clarity and eliminate unnecessary scenario options that confuse producers and planners.

2. Provide Equal Access to Programs, Flexibility

Issues:

- Programs are overly prescriptive, with narrow eligibility criteria and a one-size-fits-all model.
- Smaller, regenerative, or non-traditional farms often don't fit neatly into existing program categories and are disadvantaged in current ranking system.
- Reactive rather than proactive program eligibility criteria (e.g., issues must exist before funding is available)
- Limited flexibility in contract adjustments (e.g., payment rates frozen)

Recommendations:

- Allow more farm-by-farm flexibility in how outcomes are achieved. Move away from a one-size-fits-all model by allowing contracts to better reflect individual farm goals and outcomes.
- Rely on good conservation planning and trust in the farmer and the Farm Team.
- Standardize definitions of "historically underserved" across USDA to avoid confusion.
- Expand eligibility to include practices on non-traditional land uses (e.g., alley cropping, agroforestry, grazed cropland).
- Reward proactive and preventive conservation actions; expand access to CSP.
- Adjust contracted payment rates annually based on official inflation rate, or allow for payment rates to be adjusted mid contract based on the current fiscal year instead of the year the contract was signed..
- Ensure CSP ranking systems don't penalize farms with fewer land uses
- Use "bundled" practices to boost impact and efficiency. Allow for and promote bundling of practices to achieve synergistic benefits (e.g., combining composting, cover cropping, and silvopasture).
    - Promote utilization of Bundles in CSP contracts
    - Allow State Office to create Vermont specific Bundles
- Permit iterative, comprehensive planning, adaptive management, and changes during the lifespan of a contract.
- Ensure diverse systems such as agroforestry and diversified vegetables are supported.
- Raise minimum CSP payment thresholds for small farms (recommendation: $7,000).
- Provide locally-led incentive points within application ranking systems.
- Allow Advance Payments in contracts funded through RCPP.

3. Support Bundled and Holistic Conservation

Issues:

- Many programs still focus on single practices rather than whole-farm or landscape-scale strategies.
- Funding structures make it hard to layer or coordinate multiple beneficial practices.
- Insufficient cost-share percentages and low payment rates
- Need upfront financial support to begin conservation projects
- High capital costs for infrastructure improvements (e.g., composting systems, manure pits)

Recommendations:

- Encourage use of "bundles" (as in CSP) to achieve climate, soil health, and biodiversity goals simultaneously.
- Prioritize conservation systems that combine practices like cover cropping, fencing, composting, and silvopasture.
- Enable and fund Comprehensive Conservation Plans (CCPs) to help farms take a big-picture, long-term approach.
- Increase base and scenario-specific payment rates.
- Expand eligibility for providing upfront financial assistance.
- Allow contracts to cover shared infrastructure (e.g., mobile waste management)
- Turn on CEMA 219 "Prescribed Grazing Conservation Evaluation" and CEMA 204 "Adaptive Management for Soil Health"
- Connect RMA Whole Farm / Micro Farm Crop Insurance programs to NRCS conservation incentive programs, such as CSP.

4. Invest in Technical Assistance and Local Delivery

Issues:

- NRCS field offices are under-resourced, leading to delayed contracts, uneven evaluations, and high turnover.
- Conservation Districts are operating under unfunded mandates to conduct outreach and coordination.
- Contract delays due to understaffed NRCS field offices and engineering bottlenecks
- High staff turnover and loss of local expertise
- Inadequate onboarding and training for new staff across the conservation agriculture sector

- New Technical Service Providers (TSPs) are currently unable to gain access to AgLearn due to incomplete website overhaul

Recommendations:

- Recognize and compensate Districts as key partners in conservation planning, not just outreach.
- Expand training for Conservation Planners and allow non-NRCS staff to carry out more planning roles. Coordinate trainings for Conservation District staff to become certified planners.
- Invest in workforce development programs to train future Conservation Planners.
- Address AgLearn access issue: Since the update to AgLearn in December 2024, there is no way for new users to create an account. This was supposed to be an automated process where a newly registered Technical Service Provider (TSP) account would automatically receive AgLearn access. However, this functionality was not built into the new system. Previously, USDA personnel were able to manually create accounts, but they no longer have that ability. This is an immediate issue that is currently holding up hundreds of people from becoming registered TSPs.
- Strengthen and utilize Farm Teams as an organizing model to coordinate local partners, streamline delivery, and reduce duplication. Cross-train partnership staff and implement Farm Team coordination across all offices. Learn more here: www.whiterivernrcd.org/farm-teams
- Increase NRCS retention strategies. Reduce non-field staff and increase pay of field staff.

5. Modernize Tools and Data Management

Issues:

- Farmers and technical staff must use multiple, disconnected computer platforms.
- Data entry is repetitive, redundant, time-consuming, and not interoperable.
- Poor integration across planning and business tools at NRCS (CART, CD, Protracts etc.).
- Protracts is no longer supported at the federal level, yet it still must be utilized in federal contracting, creating delays, redundancies, and inefficiencies in NRCS contracting.
- Privacy barriers limit interoperability.
- Overburdened national network servers leads to slow service at the field office level.
- Computer tools regularly break down during peak contracting season.
- Tools are developed by non-conservation agriculture professionals.

Recommendations:

- Invest in open-source, interoperable systems (see FarmOS, the Ag Data Wallet, and the Data Food Consortium's tools.)
- Improve integration and data-sharing between NRCS and partner organizations while protecting farmer privacy.
- Build servers at the local, conservation district level, so that farms can easily own and access their data.
- Improve privacy clause interpretation to facilitate data-sharing.
- Design systems that allow for adaptive management, feedback loops, and iterative learning. Utilize iterative design in digital tools and require iterative design in federal IT contracts.
- Retire outdated practice/outcome prediction models. Support pilot projects that test alternatives to legacy predictive models—such as curve number, RUSLE, and SSURGO-based hydrological tools—that currently dominate agency decision-making. Explore more flexible, adaptive, and locally informed approaches for estimating and monitoring environmental outcomes, and phase out outdated or poorly calibrated models that limit innovation and accuracy in conservation planning and implementation.
- Address outstanding issues identified in this report to the Working Lands Subcommittee of the State Technical Committee in FY24.
- The LWG strongly encourages improvements that increase the efficiency, equity, and impact of NRCS conservation planning tools, while freeing up more time and resources for direct on-farm technical assistance and conservation planning.

6. Align Programs with Regenerative Goals

Issues:

- Many practice scenarios don't align with Vermont's agriculture-scale needs.
- Rigid, inflexible timing for contracts doesn't reflect the reality of diversified operations and Vermont's short growing season.
- Last year (FY24), many NRCS contracts did not get signed until late August or early September, at the end of the growing season.
- Practices are not well suited to diversified or regenerative operations.
- Limited support for emerging or small-scale practices (e.g., anaerobic digesters, agroforestry).

Recommendations:

- Simplify NRCS programs; Reduce overly prescriptive rules and regulations; Trust farmers.

- Develop new scenarios or interim practice standards for:
    - Small-scale anaerobic digesters and composting
    - Agroforestry and multifunctional riparian buffers
    - Deep-tillage (soil de-compaction)
    - Adaptive grazing, silvopasture, and keyline design
    - Non-toxic, biological invasive management practice scenarios: Promote non-chemical ecological vegetation management methods—such as targeted flash grazing, phased canopy closure, and competitive native plantings—within existing NRCS practice standards (e.g., 314, 315, 595). Support development of interim or enhanced scenarios to recognize and adequately compensate these biological and physical removal methods where appropriate.
- Improve CSP and EQIP enhancements to reflect Vermont's priorities
- Allow regional adaptation of practice standards
- Fund maintenance for riparian buffers (mowing, flash grazing)
- Enable temporary grazing in riparian zones where ecologically appropriate
- Align programs with regenerative goals
- Ensure that deadlines for applications, assessments, and contracts align with seasonal farming needs—particularly for practices like cover cropping, pasture renovation, tree establishment, and fencing
- Maintain an August application deadline to allow for winter planning and spring implementation
- Conduct CSP evaluations during the growing season
- Increase training for planning and implementing regenerative Practices including agroforestry, organic specialty crops, composting facilities and application, and soil health for non-commodity crops

Additional Improvements to NRCS Identified in LWG Meetings:

- Fund landscape-scale fire preparedness efforts and integrate fire management practices into NRCS programs, especially in areas near public lands like the Green Mountain National Forest.
- Invest in updated soil science and decision-making tools that provide real-time, locally relevant feedback for land managers.
- Expand practice standards and eligibility for high tunnels, especially in response to increasing weather volatility.
- Promote more farmer-led and community science approaches to conservation.

- Incorporate alternative pest management solutions, such as fly control for livestock, under existing NRCS pest management practice standards.
- Improve stability and continuity in NRCS staffing and regional office structure to reduce confusion and rebuild trust with farmers. Rely more heavily on the consistency of Conservation District relationships.
- Fund and prioritize proactive outreach to underrepresented and underserved producers, using face-to-face and field-based engagement rather than relying heavily on digital platforms.
- Ensure future Local Funding Pools receive a minimum of 3 months' lead time for outreach to increase participation and avoid underutilization of funds.
- Fund year-round NRCD coordination for Local Working Group and outreach.
- Improve marketing, bilingual access, and community-based conservation education.
- Increase support for non-monetary program benefits like infrastructure and workforce development.
- Revamp Cultural Resource Review Process:
    - Integrate local and state-recognized tribal voices in the review process. Consult with the VT Commission on Native American Affairs when areas of cultural significance are being explored and identified. Develop mitigation strategies based on tribal goals and with tribal leadership.
    - Reduce delays by revising standards that unnecessarily trigger archaeological review for low-impact practices.

****Special Topic of Concern: Shifting NRCS Conservation Funding Away from Chemical Controls in Vegetation Management****

The Local Working Group (LWG) received strong feedback from across the community—farmers, forest landowners, park managers, and conservation professionals—urging NRCS to move away from chemical herbicide use in conservation programs, especially those targeting non-native or "invasive" vegetation.

Community and Ecological Concerns

Participants cited significant **public health concerns** from herbicide use near homes, trails, schools, waterbodies, and food-producing land. Beyond immediate exposure, residents and

producers highlighted long-term concerns around groundwater contamination, pollinator loss, and soil microbial degradation.

From an ecological standpoint, chemical treatments frequently result in **non-target plant damage**, **resprouting**, and **ecosystem disruption**, undermining the goals of habitat restoration, biodiversity enhancement, and soil health. Furthermore, local conservation professionals participating in our Local Working Group reported signs of **increased herbicide tolerance** in target plant species. The feedback is clear: conservation dollars should not subsidize inputs that create additional ecological harm in the name of conservation.

Shifting Language: From "Invasive" to "Non-Native Opportunistic Species"

The LWG also recommends moving away from the term **"invasive species,"** which implies ecological harm solely based on plant origin and can oversimplify complex ecological relationships. A shift to **"non-native opportunistic species"** recognizes that management decisions should be driven by context and function—not nativity alone.

Ecological Alternatives and Cost-Based Feasibility

Mechanical and ecological vegetation control methods—including manual removal, selective grazing, and canopy management—are **already proving effective and scalable** in Vermont. One clear example is the work of *Got Weeds?*, a local business which has implemented successful non-chemical management on public and private properties across Vermont.

In 2024, *Got Weeds?* documented the treatment of over 7,000 individual plant targets (shrubs, vines, herbs) across four South Burlington city parks using fully manual methods. Treatment time ranged from one to seven days per site with a small team of trained volunteers and professionals. The main treatment applied could be described as Mechanical Control Through Repeated Physical Stress: a non-chemical control technique that involves physically wounding, girdling, or cutting the same woody stem multiple times (typically 2–3 interventions over 18–24 months) to deplete root reserves and effectively kill the plant. This is especially effective for species like oriental bittersweet, buckthorn, and honeysuckle, whose root systems rely on repeated above-ground

regeneration. The repeated stress disrupts their energy storage cycle and gradually exhausts the plant.

Based on this scale of work, we recommend NRCS consider the following for mechanical vegetation control:

Pricing Recommendations for NRCS Practices

(Based on 2024 South Burlington Field Work)

- **$35–$50/hour** for skilled vegetation technicians performing manual invasive species removal (based on regionally competitive wages and labor conditions).
- **$10–$20/hour** for trained volunteer coordination, including scheduling, site setup, and safety training.
- **$300–$500/day** flat-rate labor contracts for small teams (1–2 people) conducting mechanical removal in woodland, field, or wetland transition zones.
- **Supplemental allowances** for sites with steep slopes, dense vine networks, or herbaceous species with extended seedbanks (e.g., garlic mustard, loosestrife, knapweed).

These rates reflect real-world feasibility and provide a baseline for **NRCS to create new payment scenarios under Practice Standards 314 (Brush Management), 315 (Herbaceous Weed Treatment), and 595 (IPM)** that prioritize mechanical and ecological techniques over chemical spraying.

LWG Recommendations to NRCS

1. **Fund mechanical control scenarios** within EQIP and CSP that include hand tools, trained labor, and site-specific strategies. Support mechanical invasive species control techniques that involve multiple-year interventions—such as cutting, girdling, or bark stripping—applied 2–3 times over a two-year period to achieve root death without herbicide use. This approach has proven effective for woody non-native opportunistic species and aligns with soil health and public safety goals.
2. **Develop interim standards and practice scenarios** that focus exclusively on non-chemical options for common vegetation management concerns.
3. **Support regional training and certification programs** for Conservation District staff, TSPs, and NRCS planners on ecological weed management.

4. **Incentivize demonstration projects** and farmer-to-farmer knowledge sharing on non-chemical vegetation control approaches.
5. **Update NRCS language and educational materials** to reflect evolving best practices and cultural sensitivity around vegetation management.
6. **Train NRCS planners and field staff to understand, promote, and successfully contract these non-chemical practice scenarios.** This includes recognizing ecological strategies as viable, effective, and fully fundable conservation options within EQIP and CSP.

By expanding investment in ecological approaches and discontinuing over-reliance on herbicides, NRCS can better align its conservation delivery with public health, ecosystem resilience, and soil and water quality.

Natural Resource Conservation Priorities for the LWG Area (Top 3):

1. Soil Quality Degradation**:** Improve soil health by increasing organic matter, reducing erosion, enhancing infiltration, and improving soil structure.

2. Weather Resilience and Climate-Related Risk: Enhance landscape and farm system resilience to drought, flooding, and increasingly variable precipitation through adaptive soil and water management strategies.

3. Water Quality Degradation: Reduce nutrient, sediment, and pathogen runoff into surface waters by improving nutrient management, livestock exclusion, and riparian buffer systems.

Technical Training Needs:

- Non-toxic, biological invasive management practice scenarios
- Micro-irrigation planning in high tunnel systems
- CART/CD integration and business tools, alternative mapping tools
- Comprehensive conservation planning for small farms and regenerative systems
- Cultural competency and outreach to underserved farmers
- Small-scale compost and energy system installation

Conservation Innovation Grant (CIG) Topics to Consider:

- **Non-Chemical Invasive Species Management**
    - Develop, test, and scale ecological vegetation management techniques (e.g., flash grazing, manual/mechanical removal, phased canopy closure).
    - Include outcome monitoring to compare effectiveness against chemical-based approaches.

- **Open-Source Planning and Data Integration Tools**
    - Support interoperability between NRCS platforms (CART, CD, ProTracts); VT state-sponsored tools like the Partner Database, FarmPREP, and GoCrop; and partner tools like FarmOS, Ag Data Wallet, and Data Food Consortium standards.
    - Build farmer-facing dashboards for conservation planning and tracking.

- **Riparian Buffer Maintenance and Multifunctional Design**
    - Pilot maintenance scenarios (e.g., flash grazing, mowing, thinning) to extend buffer longevity.
    - Explore buffers that integrate habitat, food production, and flood resilience.

- **Small-Scale Resilient Infrastructure**
    - Support practical innovations such as IBC-tote anaerobic digesters, mobile composting units, and low-cost water retention systems for diversified farms.

- **Landscape-Scale Biodiversity Monitoring**
    - Develop low-cost, farmer-friendly tools to measure biodiversity outcomes and provide landscape feedback (e.g., pollinator activity, plant species richness, biomass, energy).

- **Regenerative Agroforestry and Silvopasture Systems**
    - Model long-term economic and ecological benefits of integrated tree-livestock-crop systems.

Current Investments to Continue:

- Locally-Led Funding Pools - explore options to create Local Funding Pools for CSP and AMA
- Regional Conservation Partnership Programs (RCPP) that are deeply aligned with LWG priorities and partnered with local NRCDs
- Conservation Evaluation and Monitoring Activities (CEMAs)
- Conservation Planner Certification / Farm Force Bootcamp program

Current Investments to Discontinue:

- Discontinue NRCS Support for the VT Pay-for-Performance - Phosphorus RCPP

We recommend that NRCS **cease future funding and replication of the Vermont Pay-for-Performance - Phosphorus RCPP**, based on clear evidence that the program is inequitable and out of step with Vermont's conservation values and agricultural landscape.

Despite its framing, this RCPP largely **does not incentivize new or improved conservation practices.** Instead, it issues payments based on modeled phosphorus reductions from current management practices—rewarding existing conditions rather than encouraging any shift toward more ecologically beneficial outcomes. Farmers who have not yet adopted phosphorus-reducing practices receive no meaningful support or technical guidance to help them begin.

The program further fails by **diverting technical assistance (TA) capacity away from actual conservation planning**. Local TA providers are paid primarily to **enter management data into yet another tool—FarmPREP, designed by Stone Environmental—** which replicates functions already found in NRCS platforms like CART. This approach **burdens overworked conservation staff** and **undermines relationship-based conservation planning**, which is essential for driving real change on the ground.

Critically, the Pay-for-Performance model is not designed for the diversified, regenerative, and small-scale vegetable farms that characterize much of Vermont agriculture. These operations often embody high conservation values, but lack the administrative capacity required for intensive data tracking, modeling, and digital reporting. The FarmPREP tool itself—along with the underlying algorithm used to calculate phosphorus reductions—was built primarily for conventional, monoculture cropping systems. As a result, it fails to account for the complexity, rotation diversity, and ecological management strategies typical of Vermont farms.

The program disproportionately rewards scale, uniformity, and precision-recordkeeping, while effectively excluding farms rooted in stewardship, resilience, and innovation.

For example, from 2022-2025, the White River NRCD was contracted to provide TA for two diversified, regenerative vegetable farms and one small scale conventional dairy farm via this program. Our records of technical assistance to financial assistance (TA:FA) ratios of funds received through this program are below:

Total Payments Recorded 2022-2025*

Farm	Total TA to WR District	FA Payments to Farm	Ratio TA:FA
Diversified vegetables #1	$4,121.33	$352	11.7:1
Diversified vegetables #2	$3,393.33	$1,876	1.8:1
CSFO Dairy	$4,569.33	$13,128	0.35:1
Total	$12,083.99	$15,356	0.79:1

*These numbers are based on District records and may not be reflective of final data results.

The technical assistance to financial assistance ratios from this program reveal a fundamental flaw in its design. In one case, the ratio of TA:FA was over **11:1**, meaning that for every dollar a farmer received, over eleven dollars were spent on administrative support and data entry. Even the lowest ratio, **0.35:1**, still reflects a program where significant funds are going to process and paperwork rather than to conservation implementation. These lopsided ratios show that this is a program where significant portions of the funding is not supporting farmers or advancing conservation on the ground—it's being consumed by the machinery of the program itself.

These concerns have been raised repeatedly and consistently by Vermont's farming community:

- The **2023 Vermont Conservation Districts' farmer perspectives report** emphasized that farmers want programs built on trust, planning, and relationship—not transactions or carbon-market logic. https://www.whiterivernrcd.org/vermont-farmer-agricultural-service-provider-perspectives-on-payment-for-ecosystem-services-programs

- The **2020 CT River Watershed Farmers Alliance discussion** highlighted how outcome-based models exclude smaller farms and don't reflect Vermont's on-the-ground needs. https://www.whiterivernrcd.org/farmer-discussion-on-payment-for-ecosystem-service

s-feb-2020

- The **Vermont Soil Health and PES Working Group**, created by Act 83 of 2019, **unanimously rejected pay-for-performance models** and instead called for **values-based stewardship incentives** tied to whole-farm planning and technical assistance. https://legislature.vermont.gov/assets/Legislative-Reports/PES-Working-Group-Final-Report-15Jan2023.pdf

In short, this RCPP **neither advances conservation nor serves the farmers who need support most.** It is an inefficient use of federal funds, a poor fit for Vermont's farming systems, and a diversion of scarce technical capacity from the planning-first approaches that actually work.

We urge NRCS to **discontinue this model and reinvest in planning-based, community-driven conservation programs**, including Local Funding Pools, Farm Teams, and Technical Service Provider support that centers the needs of small, regenerative farms.

Statement of Support for Local Funding Pools

The WR/O Local Working Group strongly supports the continuation and expansion of Locally-Led Funding Pools as a foundational element of USDA-NRCS's conservation delivery system in Vermont. As subdivisions of state government and part of a nationwide network of locally-governed conservation districts, NRCDs in VT have played a central role in connecting national conservation goals with local community needs since their formation in the 1930s. Our mandate—to provide a local voice in the design and delivery of federal conservation programs—makes the Locally Led Funding Pool mechanism especially well aligned with our core mission.

Conservation Districts (CDs) were created as a bridge between land stewards and federal agencies, grounded in the principle that effective conservation must be informed by local expertise, geography, and stewardship values. In this tradition, Local Working Groups (LWGs), chaired by CDs, have proven to be an essential vehicle for elevating regional conservation concerns and proposing pragmatic, community-informed solutions. The establishment of dedicated local funding pools is a natural extension of this locally led model and has become one of the most successful tools available to ensure that conservation dollars reach farms and landscapes across all regions of the state.

Local funding pools have delivered multiple benefits to our region:

- **Stronger alignment with local conservation priorities.** By targeting practices such as composting, riparian buffer restoration, energy planning, and agroforestry, local pools enable us to support solutions that reflect both local land-use realities and evolving environmental pressures.
- **Expanded access for small and diversified farms.** Many producers in our region operate on limited acreage and face unique infrastructure and market constraints. Local pools make it possible for these farms to access EQIP cost-share funding that might otherwise be out of reach through statewide competitive pools.
- **Greater engagement and responsiveness.** The Local Working Group process—supported year-round by NRCD staff—enables consistent feedback loops between producers, technical assistance providers, and NRCS staff. This approach fosters stronger relationships, clearer communication, and higher participation in conservation programs.
- **Proven outcomes.**
    - In FY23, our local energy pool helped four (4) farms assess and implement on-farm energy audits.
    - In FY24, demand for our $150,000 community-scale practices pool exceeded available funding, resulting in four (4) contracts which included the following Practices: cover cropping (2), high tunnel systems (3), mulching (3), raised beds (2), low tunnel systems (1), and soil testing (2).
    - In FY25, 21 applications were assessed, resulting in 16 currently pre-approved contracts for our $800,000 agroforestry and community scale agriculture pool. The Practices utilized in the pre-approved contracts for funding pool are: tree/shrub establishment (7), riparian forest buffer (1), high tunnel systems (13), soil health testing (5), soil testing for nutrient management (2), soil carbon amendment (3), cover crop (8), energy efficient ag operation (2), mulching (6), conservation cover (1), irrigation (1), pumping plant (1), irrigation pipeline (1), and combustion system improvement (1).
    - Our FY25 $200,000 Local Funding Pool for the Ompompanoosuc Watershed was completely unused, due to the short notice of funding availability for a narrowly-defined opportunity as well as challenges with creating Farm Service Agency records by interested land managers. This suggests that more targeted funding pools require time to conduct deep and extensive community outreach, planning, and trust building at the local level in order to be successful.

These outcomes of the past 3 years of Local Funding Pools illustrate how locally-targeted investments can catalyze participation in underused government programs and accelerate conservation outcomes.

Local funding pools provide a practical, cost-effective, and community-centered model for federal conservation delivery. By continuing to support and grow this model, NRCS affirms its commitment to locally led conservation and empowers Conservation Districts to fulfill their historic role as facilitators of public benefit on private lands.

Selected Practices for the FY2025 Local Funding Pool

The White River and Ottauquechee Local Working Group proposes a targeted FY2025 Local Funding Pool focused on expanding access to high-quality, upfront conservation planning. This pool reflects priorities identified through Local Working Group discussions and community feedback, with a clear goal of strengthening whole-farm planning, supporting Technical Service Providers (TSPs), and growing Vermont's conservation workforce.

To achieve these goals, we are requesting **$300,000 in EQIP funding** to support a local pool centered on planning and assessment-based conservation practices. We estimate 15-25 contracts to be supported by this LFP. The following NRCS practice codes have been selected:

- **CPA 199 – Conservation Plan**
- **CPA 138 – Conservation Plan Supporting Organic Transition**
- **DIA 140 – Transition to Organic Design**
- **DIA 148 – Pollinator Habitat Design**
- **CPA 110 – Grazing Management Plan**
- **DIA 159 – Grazing Management Design**
- **CPA 116 – Soil Health Management Plan**
- **DIA 162 – Soil Health Management System Design**
- **CPA 106 – Forest Management Plan**
- **DIA 160 – Prescribed Burning Design**
- **DIA 165 – Forest Management Practice Design**
- **CEMA 216 – Soil Health Testing**
- **CEMA 222 – Indigenous Stewardship Methods Evaluation**

These practices were chosen to meet several critical needs identified by the Local Working Group:

- **Increase capacity for comprehensive, up-front conservation planning** that integrates soil health, nutrient cycling, forestry, and organic transition goals.
- **Support and grow the TSP workforce**, enabling greater planning and funding throughput and improved plan quality across diverse land use types.
- **Advance data-driven adaptive management** through monitoring practices (CEMAs) that allow producers and planners to evaluate outcomes over time and improve conservation effectiveness.
- **Lay the groundwork for bundled, whole-farm EQIP and CSP contracts** and future Local Funding Pools that align with Vermont-scale farm operations and agroecological goals.

By prioritizing these planning and monitoring practices, this local funding pool provides a scalable foundation for long-term conservation delivery and aligns with NRCS goals to increase technical assistance, strengthen planning capacity, and improve environmental outcomes. This approach will lay the groundwork to allow for future Local Funding Pool practice selections to be based on needs and data identified by holistic planning processes.

Appendix C.1 – 2026 EQIP Locally Led Conservation Plan (LLCP) Rank Pool Request Form

FY 2026 EQIP Locally Led Conservation Plan Rank Pool Request Form - Completed by the DC

Land Uses

Check off those land use/uses that will be applicable to the proposed ranking pool

✓	Crop
✓	Forest
	Range
✓	Pasture
✓	Farmstead
✓	Associated Ag Land

Resource Concerns

In EQIP there are 17 nationally recognized resource concern categories for the program. DCs will select the top 5 resource concern priorities from the list below based on the LWG action plan, where highest priority is 1. Only 5 resource concerns are to be selected, prioritized as 1 through 5, with 1 being the highest priority.

	Air Quality Emissions
	Aquatic Habitat
	Concentrated Erosion
5	Degraded Plant Condition
	Field Pesticide Loss
3	Field Sediment, Nutrient and Pathogen Loss
	Fire Management
	Inefficient Energy Use
	Livestock Production Limitation
	Pest Pressure
	Salt Losses to Water
2	Soil Quality Limitations
	Source Water Depletion
	Storage and Handling of Pollutants
4	Terrestrial Habitat
1	Weather Resilience
	Wind and Water Erosion

Core Conservation Practices

Check the conservation practices recommended to include in the proposed ranking pool. These practices must address at least one of the five (5) resource concerns selected and ranked above. No more than five (5) conservation practices may be selected for the LLCP. Any additional practices must be approved by the State Conservationist prior to submission.

	101	CNMP Design and Implementation Activity
	102	Comprehensive Nutrient Management Plan

✓	106	Forest Management Plan
✓	110	Grazing Management Plan
✓	116	Soil Health Management Plan
	120	Agricultural Energy Design
✓	138	Conservation Plan Supporting Organic Transition
✓	140	Transition to Organic Design
	144	Fish and Wildlife Habitat Design
✓	148	Pollinator Habitat Design
	157	Nutrient Management Design and Implementation Activity
	158	Feed Management Design
✓	159	Grazing Management Design
✓	160	Prescribed Burning Design
	161	Pest Management Conservation System Design
✓	162	Soil Health Management System Design
	163	Irrigation Water Management Design
	164	Improved Management of Drainage Water Design
✓	165	Forest Management Practice Design
✓	199	Conservation Plan
	201	Edge-of-Field Water Quality Monitoring - Data Collection and Evaluation
	202	Edge-of-Field Water Quality Monitoring - System Installation
	207	Site Assessment and Soil Testing for Contaminants Activity
	209	PFAS Testing in Water or Soil
✓	216	Soil Health Testing
	217	Soil and Source Testing for Nutrient Management
	218	Carbon Sequestration and Greenhouse Gas Mitigation Assessment
	221	Soil Organic Carbon Stock Measurement
✓	222	Indigenous Stewardship Methods Evaluation
	223	Forest Management Assessment
	224	Aquifer Flow Test
	228	Agricultural Energy Assessment
	309	Agrichemical Handling Facility
	311	Alley Cropping
	313	Waste Storage Facility
	314	Brush Management
	315	Herbaceous Weed Treatment
	316	Animal Mortality Facility
	317	Composting Facility
	319	On-Farm Secondary Containment Facility
	325	High Tunnel System
	326	Clearing and Snagging
	327	Conservation Cover
	328	Conservation Crop Rotation
	329	Residue and Tillage Management, No Till
	330	Contour Farming
	332	Contour Buffer Strips
	333	Amending Soil Properties with Gypsum Products

	334	Controlled Traffic Farming
	338	Prescribed Burning
	340	Cover Crop
	342	Critical Area Planting
	345	Residue and Tillage Management, Reduced Till
	350	Sediment Basin
	351	Well Decommissioning
	353	Monitoring Well
	355	Groundwater Testing
	360	Waste Facility Closure
	362	Diversion
	366	Anaerobic Digester
	367	Roofs and Covers
	368	Emergency Animal Mortality Management
	372	Combustion System Improvement
	374	Energy Efficient Agricultural Operation
	378	Pond
	379	Forest Farming
	380	Windbreak/Shelterbelt Establishment and Renovation
	381	Silvopasture
	382	Fence
	384	Woody Residue Treatment
	386	Field Border
	390	Riparian Herbaceous Cover
	391	Riparian Forest Buffer
	393	Filter Strip
	395	Stream Habitat Improvement and Management
	396	Aquatic Organism Passage
	410	Grade Stabilization Structure
	412	Grassed Waterway
	420	Wildlife Habitat Planting
	422	Hedgerow Planting
	430	Irrigation Water Conveyance
	436	Irrigation Reservoir
	441	Irrigation System, Microirrigation
	442	Sprinkler System
	443	Irrigation System, Surface and Subsurface
	449	Irrigation Water Management
	464	Irrigation Land Leveling
	468	Lined Waterway or Outlet
	472	Access Control
	484	Mulching
	490	Tree/Shrub Site Preparation
	500	Obstruction Removal
	511	Forage Harvest Management
	512	Pasture and Hay Planting

	516	Livestock Pipeline
	520	Pond Sealing or Lining, Compacted Soil Treatment
	521	Pond Sealing or Lining, Geomembrane or Geosynthetic Clay Liner
	522	Pond Sealing or Lining – Concrete
	528	Prescribed Grazing
	533	Pumping Plant
	554	Drainage Water Management
	557	Row Arrangement
	558	Roof Runoff Structure
	560	Access Road
	561	Heavy Use Area Protection
	570	Stormwater Runoff Control
	574	Spring Development
	575	Trails and Walkways
	576	Livestock Shelter Structure
	578	Stream Crossing
	580	Streambank and Shoreline Protection
	582	Open Channel
	585	Stripcropping
	587	Structure for Water Control
	590	Nutrient Management
	592	Feed Management
	595	Pest Management Conservation System
	601	Vegetative Barrier
	603	Herbaceous Wind Barriers
	604	Saturated Buffer
	606	Subsurface Drain
	612	Tree/Shrub Establishment
	614	Watering Facility
	620	Underground Outlet
	627	Wastewater Treatment – Milk House
	629	Waste Treatment
	632	Waste Separation Facility
	633	Waste Recycling
	634	Waste Transfer
	635	Vegetated Treatment Area
	638	Water and Sediment Control Basin
	642	Water Well
	643	Restoration of Rare or Declining Natural Communities
	644	Wetland Wildlife Habitat Management
	645	Upland Wildlife Habitat Management
	647	Early Successional Habitat Development-Management
	649	Structures for Wildlife
	654	Road/Trail/Landing Closure and Treatment
	655	Forest Trails and Landings
	656	Constructed Wetland

	657	Wetland Restoration
	659	Wetland Enhancement
	660	Tree/Shrub Pruning
	666	Forest Stand Improvement
	670	Energy Efficient Lighting System
	672	Energy Efficient Building Envelope
	782	Storage Facility – Nursery Substrate
	805	Amending Soil Properties with Lime
	808	Soil Carbon Amendment
	810	Annual Forages for Grazing Systems
	812	Raised Bed
	821	Low Tunnel Systems

Applicability and Category Question (if submitting a geospatial layer request, specify this in the space below and include a detailed explanation of what the boundaries are):

Is the applicant located in the White River or Ottauquechee Conservation

Program Questions

Question Number	Question	Points
1	Is the applicant enrolled in CRP-TIP?	5
2	Does the applicant qualify as Historically Underserved?	10
3	Is the applicant interested in a Comprehensive Conservation Plan?	20
4	If the application is for a CPA106 or DIA165, is the applicant interested in planning agroforestry practices?	20
5	Does the application include both a CPA and a DIA?	45
	Total Points	200

Resource Questions

Question Number	Question	Points
1	Does the application address weather resilience?	40
2	Does the application address soil quality limitations?	40
3	Does the application address field sediment and nutrient loss	40
4	Does the application address terrestrial habitat?	40
5	Does the application address degraded plant conditions	40
	Total Points	200

Ranking Component Weights

Total ranking component weight must equal 100%. DCs will select vulnerability, program priorities and resource priorities percentages. Percentages for each must be between the minimum and maximum percentage located in the EQIP national ranking template, as outlined below. The planned practice points and efficiency percent are set nationally.

	Min %	Max %	Suggested Weight
Vulnerabilities	10	40	10
Planned Practice Points	15	15	15
Program Priorities	5	15	15
Resource Priorities	20	60	50
Efficiency	10	10	10
TOTAL			100%

Funds Being Requested ($)

$300,000

Small Agriculture LLCP

Windham County

Natural Resources Conservation District

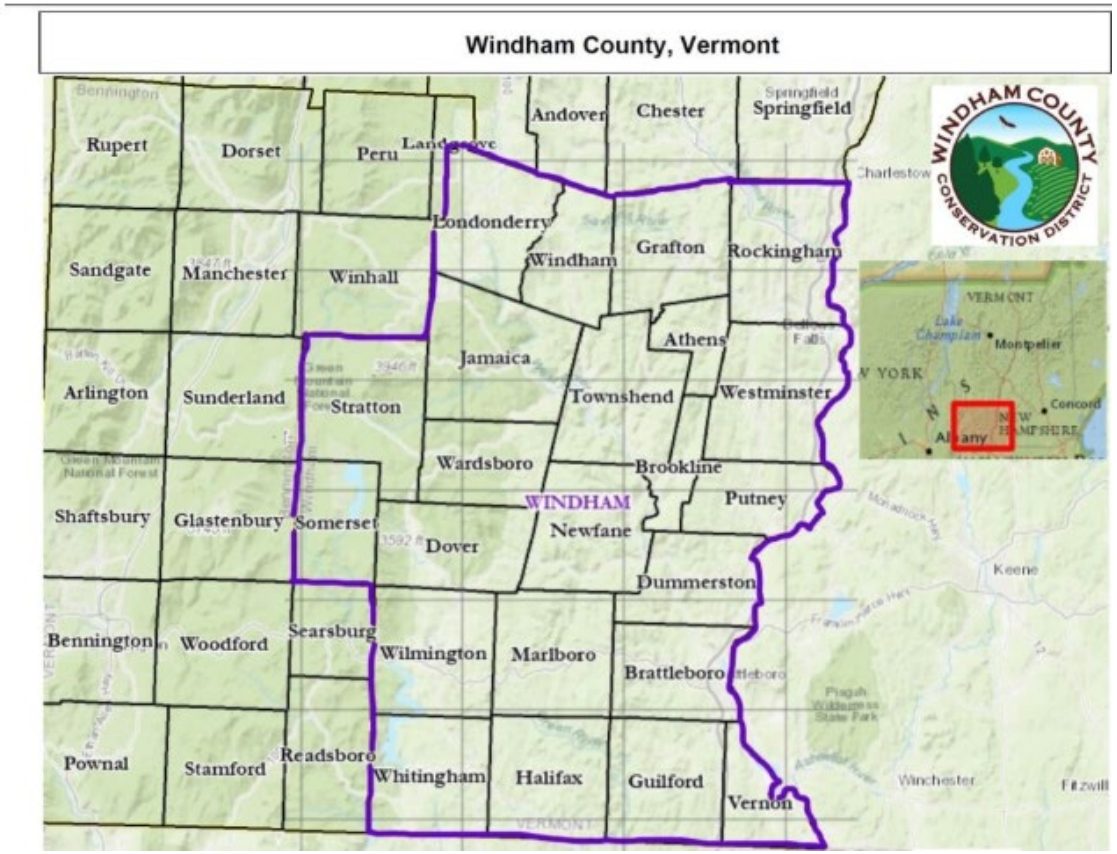
Who Needs Assistance & Why

110 Responses

23 Farms

Small scale agricultural producers, homesteaders and community gardeners have expressed interests in receiving financial assistance to address concerns about soil quality, degraded plant conditions and erosion.

Project Area



Core Conservation Practices

- 325 High Tunnel System
- 329 Residue and Tillage Management, No Till
- 340 Cover Crop
- 528 Prescribed Grazing
- 808 Soil Carbon Amendment

With 16 other complimentary practices

Timeline

- The Windham County NRCD will start advertising through the summer of 2025 to have as many customers ready for the application deadline in August 2025.
- District staff will assist with applications and ranking.
- We will have contracts ready to go for Spring 2026.

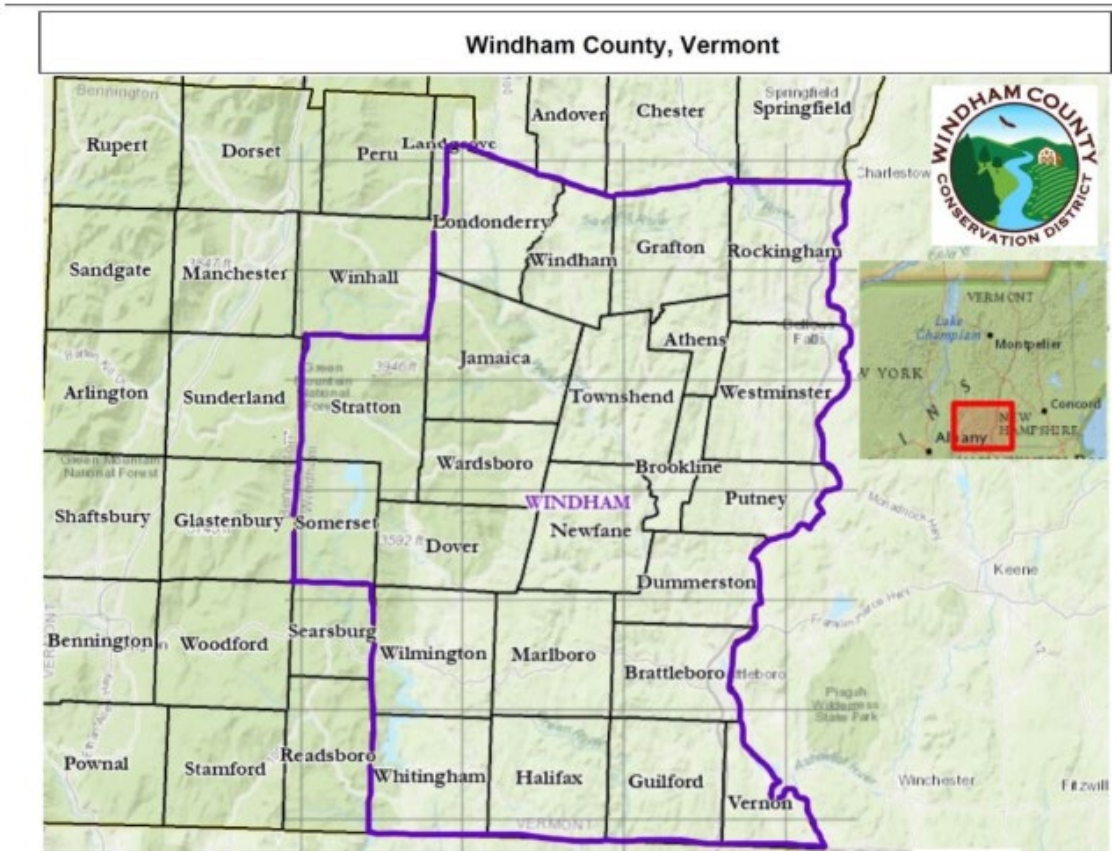
Questions?

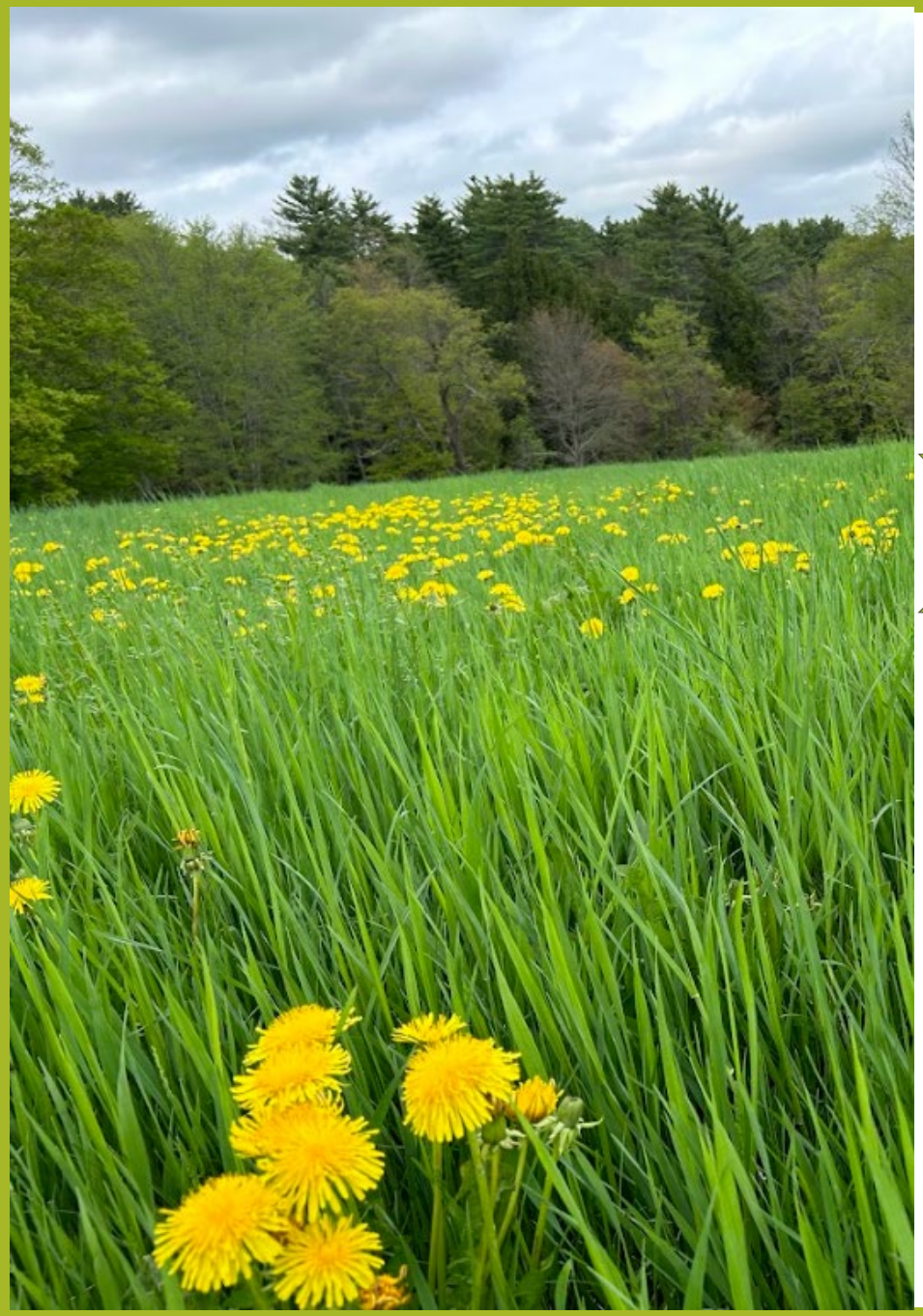
Forest Management Plan
LLCP

Who Needs Assistance & Why

For the past three years Windham County NRCD has championed LLCPs targeted at addressing the ever-present problem of invasive species in our forested landscape. We have now come to realize a barrier to this funding source is having an FMP. We believe that by having a small LLCP that is targeted specifically at the creation of FMPs we will then have more future applicants for brush management and other forest health practices.

Project Area





Core Conservation Practices

- 106 Forest Management Plan
- 144 Fish and Wildlife Habitat Design
- 148 Pollinator Habitat Design
- 165 Forest Management Practice Design

Timeline

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Questions?

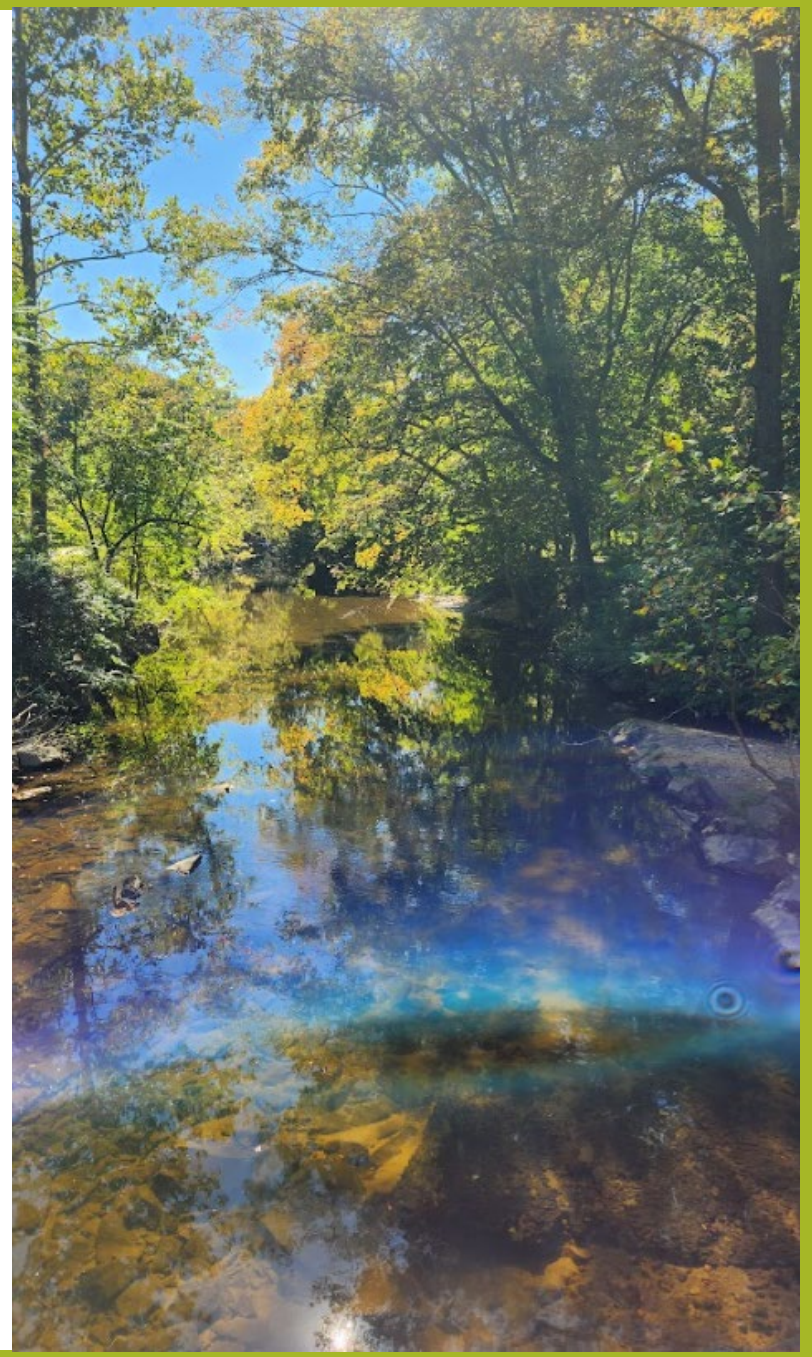
FOREST HEALTH LLCP

Target

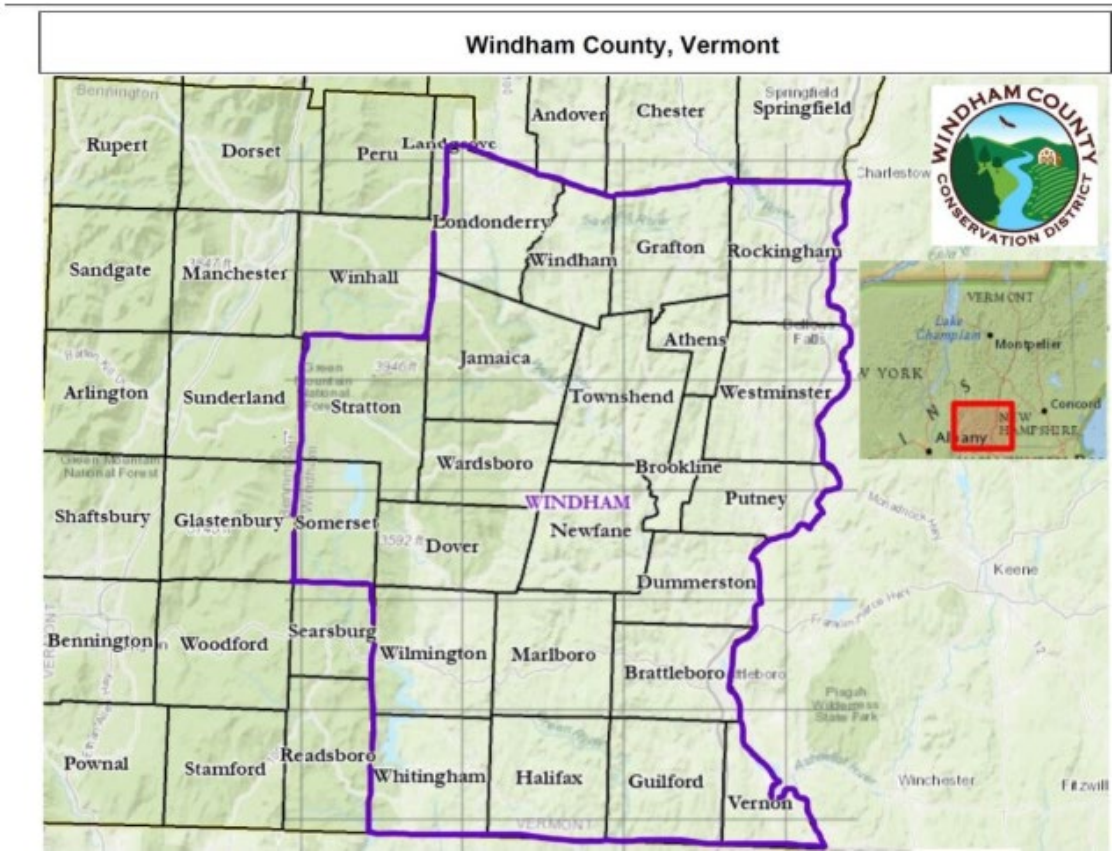
Prevent the spread of invasives and strengthen local forest management.

The eradication of invasive plants before they become well established is an important component of any invasive plant control plan. In addition, the control of invasive plants in forests can release desirable regeneration from competition.

Maintaining species diversity is a key component to a strong weather adaptation strategy.



Project Area



Core Conservation Practices

- 314 Brush management
- 396 Aquatic Organism Passage
- 420 Wildlife Habitat Planting
- 647 Early Successional Habitat Development – Management
- 666 Forest Stand Improvement

With 9 other complimentary practices

Timeline

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Questions?

Upcoming State Tech Committee Meetings

- July 16, 2025 (please complete survey)
- October 22, 2025