Helping People Help the Land is what drives us to achieve our vision for Vermont, each and every day.

NRCS Vermont is proud of our work to assist private land users with meeting their conservation objectives. This strategic plan will serve as a guide for us going forward for the next five to ten years. As with any road map, we will evaluate it along the way and make course corrections as needed to respond to new and emerging issues. We are focused on delivering climate smart solutions to improve soil health, water quality, and wildlife habitat. We will use a more holistic approach to provide sound, science-based recommendations to achieve ecosystem health across all of our activities. We will do all of this by listening and responding to customer needs, expanding our customer base to reach more diverse and historically underserved producers, and cooperating and collaborating with our partners to maximize our effectiveness. And we will deliver these services through building, supporting, and training a diverse, talented and widely respected workforce. Our team looks forward to carrying out the goals outlined in this plan and continuously evaluating our progress going forward.

Vicky Drew
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About NRCS Vermont

The Natural Resources Conservation Service Vermont (NRCS Vermont) is responsible for collaborating with private land users (e.g., farmers, forest landowners), communities, and state and local conservation partners to protect and improve natural resources on private lands throughout the state. As a vital part of the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), NRCS Vermont will update this strategic plan, as necessary, to align with USDA’s and national NRCS’s Strategic Plans.


Organizational Structure

NRCS Vermont is led by the State Conservationist, who is supported by members of the core Leadership Team. Headquartered within the Colchester NRCS State Office, the Leadership Team works with technical and administrative specialists to assist field staff by providing technical information, training, outreach support, and oversight of conservation planning and practices.

The NRCS Vermont strategic goals are achieved through the efforts of the Leadership Team, NRCS staff, and conservation partners located throughout the state in ten NRCS field offices. The state is divided into four NRCS zones, each led by an NRCS District Conservationist and each zone has a varying number of field staff.
Zone and Office Locations
Mission

We deliver conservation solutions so agricultural producers and forest land users can protect natural resources and feed a growing world.

Driving Force

Helping People Help the Land
Vision

Our vision for the future is inspirational and aspirational. The various components of our vision combine to paint a picture of the difference we will make in Vermont and the world as we pursue our strategic goals over the next five years and beyond.

- VT is a conservation leader with soil and water bodies amongst the healthiest in the world.
- Healthy soils remain in place to provide the needed nutrients for plants to grow and humans to thrive.
- Clean and abundant water, healthy soils, resilient landscapes, and thriving agricultural communities through voluntary conservation.
- Wildlife, flora, and fauna abound in ecologically diverse and protected ecosystems.
- Privately-owned farms and forests are managed under climate-smart conservation plans.
- All have easy access to clean drinking water and sustainably produced local foods.
- Robust vitality in businesses that rely on natural resources to thrive economically and socially.
Environmental Scan

As the conservation landscape continues to change, it is important for us to periodically conduct a scan to identify and monitor the factors that influence our operations and strategic decision making. The scan included research and input from employees and stakeholders across the state. The figure below presents a summary of findings.

Strengths
- Passionate, and mission-driven employees
- Employees dedicated to customer service
- Accessibility and responsiveness to partners
- Far-reaching communication and outreach with customers
- Financial assistance for customers

Weaknesses
- Complex and time-consuming processes, especially for new customers
- Experience and knowledge gaps due to staff turnover
- Excessive staff workload
- Inadequate tools and technology for field staff
- Inadequate staff training on customer’s needs

Opportunities
- Increase outreach to diverse, underserved, and innovative producers
- Improve and integrate technology to streamline service
- Increase education and resources for new employees on programs/services
- Increase technical skills training (e.g., Conservation Planner Certification, specialized conservation areas, NRCS systems [CART, AutoCAD])

Threats
- Changing agricultural landscape impacts focus of future services
- Customer uncertainty about the benefits of conservation practices
- Increasing cost of conservation practices
- Inadequate balance of programs to properly combat climate change
- Difficulties created by frequently changing rules and bureaucracy
- Lack of specialized technical positions

Key Terms
- **Biodiversity**: a measure of variation at the genetic, species and ecosystem level
- **Climate-smart conservation**: practices to help customers build healthier soils, improve nutrient stewardship, sustainably manage livestock, increase energy efficiency, or pursue private forest growth and retention, among other outcomes
- **Land user**: any eligible producer, operator, lessor, group, or nonpublic entity that individually or collectively has the authority to make and implement conservation planning decisions for the land involved
- **Soil health**: the continued capacity of soil to function as a vital living ecosystem that sustains plants, animals, and humans
- **Sustainable ecosystem**: a biological community that can maintain its composition, structure, and processes including the diversity of plant and animal communities
Strategic Goals

**Goal 1:** Champion climate-smart conservation practices on private land resulting in improved soil health, enhanced water quality, and sustainable ecosystems

Soil and water quality are Vermont’s most critical natural resource concerns, and the impending challenges of climate change require us to examine our strategy and take a more holistic approach to conservation planning. The evolving landscape in Vermont necessitates a continuous assessment and balance of staffing and financial resources between programs and natural resource concerns. We will identify and promote science-driven strategies to assist customers in improving water quality, enhancing soil health, and increasing biodiversity and improving ecosystem health. We will take full advantage of the technical and financial assistance available to customers to achieve Vermont’s critical conservation objectives.

**Key Performance Indicators (KPIs)**

- Increase number and acres of planned practices that benefit soil health annually
- Reduce the percentage of agricultural nutrient runoff (e.g., phosphorous, nitrogen) in targeted impaired water bodies annually, contributing to the delisting of water bodies
- Increase wildlife habitat practice implementation within the areas identified within the Vermont Fish and Wildlife Department’s Vermont Conservation Design as the highest priority landscape blocks or along the highest priority surface waters and riparian areas annually
**Goal 1**

**Targeted Strategies & Programs**

1. **Ensure comprehensive conservation planning before program enrollment**
   - Use planning tools and science-based approaches to identify and target areas in most critical need
   - Investigate tracking practice installation in targeted areas, running them through tools such as the Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC) phosphorus reduction tool and extrapolating from these subsets
   - Increase planning and implementation of practices known to reduce phosphorus pollution
   - Increase landscape-wide planning to drive climate resiliency (i.e., use all applicable programs to support sustainable ecosystems by protecting critical farmland, restoring floodplain wetlands, managing healthy forests and implementing riparian buffers and carbon sequestration strategies)
   - Promote and increase projects/practices that benefit both at-risk species (e.g., pollinators, declining species, species identified in the state’s Wildlife Action Plan) and/or climate resilient forests
   - Promote and increase projects in support of regional partnerships (e.g., New England Pollinator Partnership [NEPP], Working Lands for Wildlife [WLFW]–Northeast Turtles Project)
   - Promote and increase aquatic habitat/water quality projects (e.g., Trout Unlimited [TU], Regional Conservation Partnership Program [RCPP], Strategic Wood Additions [SWA])
   - Promote and increase Riparian Forest Buffer implementation (e.g., Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program [CREP], Environmental Quality Incentives Program [EQIP], Conservation Stewardship Program [CSP])
   - Target Agricultural Conservation Easement Program, Wetland Reserve Easements (ACEP WRE) annual easement acquisition funding to locations that meet at least one of the following criteria:
     - A composite water quality impact and conservation value score of 5 or higher in The Nature Conservancy’s Vermont Water Quality Blueprint 2.0
     - Designated as a highest priority landscape block from the Vermont Fish and Wildlife Department’s Vermont Conservation Design
     - Connected to highest priority surface waters and riparian areas from the Vermont Fish and Wildlife Department’s Vermont Conservation Design
     - Achieved species habitat conservation goals identified in the Vermont Fish and Wildlife Department’s Vermont Wildlife Action Plan
     - Established connectivity or contiguity with previously conserved parcels
   - Equip all field offices with soil health assessment tools
   - Promote soil health systems instead of single practice implementation
   - Continue supporting the Conservation Effects Assessment Project’s (CEAP) on-going efforts in Vermont (e.g., Watershed Study, Agricultural Conservation Planning Framework [ACPF], Landscape Planning Package)
Targeted Strategies & Programs continued

2. Maximize benefits of all available sources of technical and financial resources
   - Continuously analyze Farm Bill programs and related funding to maximize the financial support available for customers
   - Expand watershed planning in priority areas to emphasize practice adoption with partners on high priority practices, source water protection areas, and innovative practices that have been identified
   - Increase technical and financial assistance to customers who are transitioning to more sustainable operations
   - Promote transitioning to forage harvest by managed grazing rather than mechanical methods to support wildlife habitat and build soil health
   - Encourage and promote innovation where feasible and incorporate new technology into our planning toolbox by leveraging the Conservation Innovation Grant (CIG) Program and Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP)
   - Prioritize funding of contracts that address resource management system (RMS)-level plans for the mentioned conservation practices
   - Incorporate models of practice efficacy into conservation planning and funding priorities (e.g., phosphorus reduction credits, soil vulnerability ratings, impaired watersheds)
   - Share emissions reductions best practices (e.g., manure injection, carbon sequestration) with our customers and partners
   - Investigate the costs and benefits of feed management as an air quality practice

3. Develop and distribute an annual report of accomplishments to staff and partners
   - Utilize the Total Maximum Daily Loads (TMDL) Progress Report
   - Track and report wetland conserved and restored acres, as well as other prioritized practices
   - Support the development of the annual Vermont Clean Water Initiative Performance Report by the Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC)

4. Using all applicable programs (e.g., Emergency Watershed Protection [EWP] Program, Wetlands Reserve Easements [WRE], PL-566 Watershed Program), purchase and/or restore land that is in flood attenuation areas, creating resiliency to ever increasing flood events
Goal 2: Maximize conservation impacts by meeting customer needs and expanding the customer base

Our mission relies on the stewardship efforts of our customers—private land users. We are determined to reach and have a positive impact with all eligible customers across the state, meeting their diverse needs, and helping them to navigate the NRCS conservation delivery system. We will deliver meaningful education on the importance of conservation planning, establish realistic goals and expectations of conservation practices, and clearly communicate NRCS Vermont programs and eligibility requirements.

**Key Performance Indicators (KPIs)**

- ✓ Increase new customer participation annually
- ✓ Improve customer feedback satisfaction annually
- ✓ Increase the number of outreach events with NRCS participation
- ✓ Increase participation of underrepresented groups in State Technical Committee (STC), STC subcommittees, and local work groups
- ✓ Decrease the average length of time from request for assistance to implementation of practices
Targeted Strategies & Programs

1. **Expand the participation of farmers and other land users in NRCS Vermont programs through targeted outreach and communication efforts**
   - Assess the use and accessibility of GovDelivery as an effective communication tool with customers
   - Increase the number of active participants in the STC and STC subcommittees to include underrepresented groups and non-traditional customer groups
   - Tailor outreach materials to engage all those who are eligible for NRCS Vermont programs and services
   - Communicate measurable, meaningful conservation outcomes to motivate current and prospective customers
   - Ensure that the outreach and education plan includes on-site demonstrations and participation in community events
   - Task an existing or new committee to identify new underserved groups, determine if and what we can offer them, and provide suggestions on outreach efforts
   - Hold training and discussions with District Conservationists and District Managers on expanding their participation and role in local work groups
   - Develop an education and outreach plan to increase participation in local work groups
   - Assess and reengage unfunded customers to inform and improve program implementation
   - Evaluate customer demographics including gender and race to ensure equitable participation in programs

2. **From start-to-finish, ensure customers have a positive experience throughout the planning process**
   - Utilize the Vermont new and beginning farmer committee to enhance communication with new and/or prospective customers, including workshops to provide education on eligibility and application process
   - Provide training and tools for employees to foster effective communication and build successful relationships
   - Conduct individual customer meetings to clarify eligibility requirements for the land and the operator and support them through the application process
   - Investigate the use of zone Outreach Specialists to serve as a liaison between the customer and the NRCS Vermont technical staff and partners
   - Provide staff across zones with effective methods (e.g., printed materials, social media, technical knowledge) to disseminate a clear and consistent message to current and potential customers

3. **Strategically measure the effectiveness of our customer engagement efforts**
   - Implement process to track and measure reception and effectiveness of outreach initiatives
   - Create and implement a process to measure our return on investment over time (i.e., conservation results of resources spent)
   - Investigate the use and development of a customer satisfaction survey
Goal 3: Build, prepare, and retain an engaged workforce dedicated to conservation and customer service

Our talented and dedicated NRCS Vermont and Partner staff are our greatest resource, because they are our direct connection to customers and the guardians of our mission. Likewise, the loss of experienced staff and an underprepared workforce are among our greatest risks. Over the next five years and beyond, we will seek out strategic and innovative ways to attract and hire a qualified and diverse workforce. Once on board, we will invest in our employees’ training and long-term career growth. We will equip our team with the knowledge and resources to succeed across the various situations they may encounter. We will ensure that employees feel valued and recognized for their contributions to protecting Vermont’s natural resources. Additionally, we will continuously improve our internal communications so that our workforce and customers across the state receive the information they need in a clear, consistent, and timely manner.

Key Performance Indicators (KPIs)

- Improve average scores on targeted Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey (FEVS) items and indices compared to prior year
- Maintain staffing levels at an average of 95% of available positions throughout the year
- Increase employee retention with the agency at each career level as measured against nationwide average
- Ensure all new employees have the opportunity to receive the training needed to obtain conservation planner certification within two years of onboarding
Targeted Strategies & Programs

1. Continuously improve our internal communications to keep the workforce connected and share information in a clear, consistent, transparent, and timely manner
   - Review and analyze FEVS results to identify areas for improvement and explore opportunities for a follow up survey to identify actionable activities
   - Hold an NRCS Vermont Town Hall to review identified concerns
   - Establish an employee advisory committee to identify and address issues, concerns and ideas
   - Implement and track an internal communications plan to deliver consistent information to staff so they can disseminate the same message across all customers and zones
   - Establish virtual meet-and-greet sessions to connect leaders and staff across the state
   - Establish recurring listening sessions with field offices to solicit feedback, identify and prioritize concerns

2. Develop a long-term workforce planning and position management strategy that achieves the optimal balance of job series and grade levels
   - Conduct analyses of current and projected employee workloads
   - Seek employee feedback on the type of positions and number of field office staff needed to efficiently and effectively address local workloads
   - Use long-term cost-benefit analyses to make decisions on how, when, and if to fill all newly recommended positions
   - Determine the value of hiring a watershed engineer to manage the Emergency Watershed Protection (EWP) Program, dam rehabs, and watershed operations
   - Increase the utilization of Technical Service Providers (TSPs), where appropriate and as funds allow
   - Investigate the feasibility of field positions outside of the 0457 series

3. Establish effective recruitment strategies to attract qualified and diverse talent with a passion for conservation
   - Build strong pipelines of diverse talent across the state, including partnerships with colleges, universities, and other institutions
   - Collaborate with the Human Resources Division (HRD) to implement a position description (PD) strategy that attracts qualified entry-level staff and offers meaningful career paths (e.g., expanded grade level eligibility, inter-disciplinary)
   - Provide a realistic job preview to attract those who will be a good fit for our work
   - Leverage the Pathways Program to support entry-level recruitment and engagement
   - Promote the Mentoring Program to prospective employees as an investment in their career through partnership with experienced employees to facilitate knowledge transfer
   - Interview intra-agency transfers to/from NRCS Vermont to determine how NRCS Vermont measures compared to other states
Targeted Strategies & Programs continued

4. Prepare new employees for a successful career at NRCS Vermont
   • Design a comprehensive “Welcome to NRCS Vermont” Orientation Program, including sessions on the strategy, structure, processes, people, partners, and programs of NRCS Vermont, and applicable “Managing for Excellence” modules
   • Pair new employees with experienced employees to shadow for first six months on the job
   • Assign all new employees a mentor for participation in the one-year Mentoring Program
   • Implement an Employee Handbook to provide a consistent baseline of information, access to resources, and example staff career paths
   • Improve new employee onboarding through iterative feedback synthesized by the onboarding team

5. Provide staff with technical and professional development opportunities to help them on the job and to advance in their career
   • Increase the focus of training on the integration of whole systems instead of separate categories of resource concerns
   • Provide training and feedback to employees on customer service and effective outreach
   • Encourage developmental opportunities beyond training (e.g., details, stretch assignments, mentoring, seminar attendance, AgLearn [USDA’s learning management system])
   • Develop an annual training plan to ensure the delivery of the training required for all new hires to achieve conservation planner certification within two years of onboarding
Goal 4: Strengthen coordination, collaboration, and communication with partners to achieve shared objectives

One of Vermont's greatest strengths is the network of people and organizations that are dedicated to conservation. We are committed to maintaining and expanding our partner relationships. We will actively participate in establishing conservation strategies and aligning efforts to achieve mutual goals. We will maintain awareness of the purpose and applicability of partners' programs and services to maximize support to our customers. We will provide effective and timely communications and training to our partners on our programs and services to maximize their benefits for Vermont customers.

Key Performance Indicators (KPIs)

- Achieve the intended outcomes of the Vermont Agricultural Water Quality Partnership (VAWQP) Strategic Plan 2019-2024
- Strengthen and expand partnerships around soil health and biodiversity
- Improve the quantity and quality of partnership communication as indicated within partner feedback sessions
- Increase participation of underrepresented groups in State Technical Committee (STC), STC subcommittees, and local work groups
Targeted Strategies & Programs

1. **Promote awareness of NRCS Vermont services and partners’ services**
   - Maintain a current directory of partners and their conservation programs/services and ensure all employees have access to, and are aware of, this resource
   - Provide training and resources to partners, including state district managers, on NRCS Vermont resource concerns, programs, and technical capabilities
   - Increase the readership of GovDelivery as a communication tool with partners
   - Establish targeted, direct, and timely outreach regarding key program deadlines and enrollment processes
   - Develop key dates as early as possible in the fiscal year
   - Hold partner listening sessions to solicit feedback regarding outreach and communications

2. **Participate in coordinating conservation efforts and aligning messaging with partners**
   - Clearly define the roles of partners and NRCS Vermont in various conservation efforts, programs, and initiatives and provide training as needed
   - Strengthen the partnership and coordination with the Natural Resources Conservation Council (NRCC), the leadership organization of the Vermont Conservation Districts
   - Maintain active involvement in and build partnerships through the Vermont Association of Conservation Districts (VACD), the VAWQP, and other partnership groups
   - Evaluate and continuously improve STC and local workgroup meetings with partners to prioritize concerns and enhance coordination
   - Strengthen partnerships and coordination with state and federal agencies to improve customer service
   - Implement an Outreach and Communication Plan with the VAWQP subgroup and other partners so that all partners are disseminating the same conservation message to potential customers in a consistent and timely manner
   - When feasible, share aggregate data with relevant partners
   - Ensure that regulatory partners do not have access to voluntary, individual producer data
   - Work with partners to develop a partner program brochure and provide it to customers to highlight the resources and services available

3. **Continuously scan the state for potential partners to expand our network**
   - Expand the number and diversity of partner involvement in watershed and other local workgroups
   - Seek new partnerships with other conservation agencies and groups
   - Establish and maintain partner agreements and stakeholder memorandums of understanding (MOUs)
The NRCS Vermont Mission, Vision, and Strategic Goals provide the framework for all activities and decision making throughout the lifecycle of this Strategic Plan. This Strategic Plan is a living document and NRCS Vermont is committed to continuously planning, managing, monitoring, and improving its programs and initiatives in order to be the driving force in the conservation of Vermont’s natural resources. This process, depicted below, links to the fiscal year (FY) (October 1 – September 30) and consists of three phases: Plan, Manage, and Evaluate.

**Phase 1: Plan**

**Beginning of FY Quarter 1 (October):** At the beginning of each fiscal year, and based on an evaluation of the previous year’s results, we will revisit relevant drivers; reassess our strengths and weaknesses; re-validate our vision and strategic goals; and make refinements as needed to our objectives, metrics, and initiatives.

**Phase 2: Manage**

**FY Quarter 1 through Quarter 4 (October – September):** Leveraging key data sources and information gleaned through processes such as the development and review of business plans, individual performance plans, and program reports, we will regularly track our progress against our key performance indicators. The Leadership Team will review this data on a quarterly basis and brief staff on our progress throughout the year.

**Phase 3: Evaluate**

**End of FY Quarter 4 (September):** At the end of each fiscal year, we will conduct a review of the past year’s accomplishments. The annual evaluation process involves looking back at the goals in our Strategic Plan and assessing our progress. It will drive a recalibration of the objectives, metrics, and initiatives we have set, as well as inform the cascading action plans and performance objectives across our various teams and individual employees. Specifically, we will ask ourselves:

- How much progress have we made towards our Vision?
- Are our targeted strategies and programs and goals still relevant?
- Which of our targeted strategies and programs have we completed?
- Which targeted strategies and programs are no longer needed?
- Do we have sufficient Initiatives defined to deliver on incomplete targeted strategies and programs?
- Are our Metrics still effective for measuring progress towards our targeted strategies and programs?
- If we fell short of our targets, how and why did it happen and what can be done to improve?

This evaluation process will drive iterations and adjustments, which are refined again during the ‘Plan’ phase.
Key Stakeholders

We would like to thank our key stakeholders for their participation in the development and implementation of this Strategic Plan. NRCS Vermont’s success relies heavily on our collaboration and engagement with key stakeholders. These stakeholders include, but are not limited to:

**Charitable & Non-Profit Organizations**
- Audubon Vermont
- Champlain Valley Farmer Coalition (CVFC)
- Green Mountain Horse Association (GMHA)
- Northeast Organic Farming Association of Vermont (NOFA VT)
- Rural Vermont
- The Nature Conservancy
- The Orianne Society
- The Vermont Agricultural Water Quality Partnership (VAWQP)
- Trout Unlimited
- Upper Valley Land Trust
- Vermont Association of Conservation Districts (VACD)
- Vermont Beef Producers Association (VBPA)
- Vermont Coverts: Woodlands for Life
- Vermont Farm Bureau
- Vermont Grass Farmer’s Association
- Vermont Land Trust
- Vermont Maple Sugar Makers’ Association (VMSMA)
- Vermont River Conservancy
- Vermont Sustainable Jobs Fund (VSJF)
- Vermont Tree Fruit Growers Association (VTFGA)
- Vermont Woodlands Association
- Vermont Young Farmers Coalition
- Watershed United Vermont

**Educational Institutions**
- University of Vermont (UVM)
- Extension Center for Sustainable Agriculture

**Federal Agencies**
- Farm Service Agency (FSA)
- U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service (FWS)

**Partnerships**
- State Technical Committee (STC)
- Vermont Agricultural Water Quality Partnership (VAWQP)

**Offices of Elected Officials**
- Congressman Welch
- Senator Leahy
- Senator Sanders

**State & Local Agencies**
- Vermont Agency of Agriculture, Food & Markets (VAAFM)
- Vermont Agency of Natural Resources
- Vermont Housing & Conservation Board (VHCB)
- Vermont Land Trust
- Vermont State Natural Resources Conservation Council (NRCC)
- Winooski Conservation District

**Tribes**
- Abenaki Nation

NRCS Vermont 2021-2026 Strategic Plan