



Vermont's Environmental Common Agenda

Your guide to
Vermont's most pressing
environmental priorities
in 2016

The Vermont Environmental Common Agenda highlights the top environmental priorities and proposed solutions for the 2016 legislative session. This Agenda represents the priorities of a range of environmental organizations across Vermont working on matters affecting our shared natural resources, the character of our communities, and the health of Vermonters.

The following environmental priorities will be advocated for by Vermont Conservation Voters (VCV) and partner groups in the 2016 legislative session. These are focal issues on which VCV will assess lawmakers' actions in the 2016 Environmental Scorecard, and VCV will inform voters about their elected officials' leadership, support, or opposition to these goals.

Top environmental priorities for 2016:

Goal: A Clean Energy Future

Legislative Priorities:

- Put a price on carbon pollution and use the proceeds to cut taxes and help all Vermonters transition off fossil fuels
- Maintain the state's strong commitment to energy efficiency and advancing thoughtful, strategic deployment of local, clean energy sources
- Divest State investments from fossil fuels, starting with coal and ExxonMobil

Goal: Forest Integrity

Legislative Priorities:

- Incentivize landowners to conserve forestland
- Improve planning and land use tools to maintain forests
- Increase funding for forest conservation
- Support a sustainable forest economy, including forest-related jobs, recreation, diverse wood products, and more



Partner organizations consulted in compiling the Environmental Common Agenda for 2016:

Vermont Conservation Voters (VCV)
Vermont Natural Resources Council (VNRC)
Vermont Public Interest Research Group (VPIRG)
Conservation Law Foundation (CLF)
Vermont Chapter of the Sierra Club
Toxics Action Center (TAC)



The Environmental Common Agenda is a project of Vermont Conservation Voters.

Vermont Conservation Voters (VCV) is the non-partisan political action arm of Vermont's environmental community. Since 1982, our mission has been to defend and strengthen the laws that safeguard our environment. We work to elect environmentally responsible candidates. We then hold legislators accountable for the decisions they make affecting our air, water, communities, land, and wildlife.

For more information contact:

Lauren Hierl

Political Director

Vermont Conservation Voters

P.O. Box 744

Montpelier, VT 05601

lauren@vermontconservationvoters.org

(802) 224-9090

www.VermontConservationVoters.org

Goal: A Clean Energy Future

The Problem:

The effects of global warming are already being felt in Vermont, and scientists predict these impacts will worsen over time. We owe it to our children and grandchildren to do our part to reduce our greenhouse gas emissions and make the transition to a low-carbon economy. This transition will be essential in Vermont and around the planet as we try to reduce the threat – and significant costs – of increasingly destructive weather events like Tropical Storm Irene and other negative impacts of climate change.

The State of Vermont has taken some positive steps, including enacting an innovative Renewable Energy Standard (Act 56) in



2015, and establishing strong goals to dramatically reduce our greenhouse gas emissions and increase the amount of energy generated from renewable sources. A 2014 Department of Public Service analysis, the *Total Energy Study*,¹ shows these goals are not only feasible but can be done in a manner that maintains or helps our state's economy. And recent analyses show our investments in energy efficiency programs have delivered Vermonters \$2 in savings for every \$1 invested, and helped defer \$400 million in transmission upgrades.

Transitioning to a low-carbon economy is not without its challenges. While we believe the state must maintain its commitment to these goals, we are working to ensure the deployment of renewable energy, efficiency measures, and tax reforms to incentivize this transition are all undertaken in smart, affordable, and equitable ways. Further steps to cut our dependence on fossil fuels will allow us to take our energy future into our own hands. The legislative proposals we support will help Vermonters save energy, reduce their energy bills, and curb our dependence on fossil fuels.

1 http://publicservice.vermont.gov/sites/psd/files/Pubs_Plans_Reports/TES/TES%20FINAL%20Report%2020141208.pdf

2 <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/energy-environment/wp/2015/11/05/exxonmobil-under-investigation-for-misleading-the-public-about-climate-change/>

Proposed Legislative Solutions:

✓ **Put a price on carbon pollution while cutting taxes for individuals and businesses, and helping people transition off fossil fuels.**

- Implement a charge on gas and oil distributors for the carbon pollution that comes from burning harmful fossil fuels.
- Return the revenue generated to Vermonters and businesses through tax cuts and rebates, as well as programs to help people invest in renewable energy solutions and reduce their energy use.

✓ **Maintain the state's strong commitment to energy efficiency and advancing thoughtful, strategic deployment of local, clean energy sources.**

- Continue Vermont's commitment to 90% renewable energy by 2050, while supporting steps to encourage: renewable energy on rooftops, parking lots, and other developed sites; regional planning efforts; and broad participation in permitting processes.
- Expand funding for low-income weatherization and efficiency programs.
- Oppose over-reaching provisions that curtail the essential transition to clean energy sources.

✓ **Divest State investments from fossil fuels, starting with coal and ExxonMobil.**

- Support divesting State investments from fossil fuels, which will align Vermont's pension investments with Vermont's clean energy goals and a low carbon economy, while also protecting public pensions from risky investments and stranded assets.
- Start with coal – an industry in structural decline – and ExxonMobil, a company currently being investigated for deceiving the public and its shareholders on the impacts of climate change and associated risks to their business operations.²

For more information on energy initiatives, contact these experts at partner organizations:

- Johanna Miller, Vermont Natural Resources Council
(802) 223-2328 Ext.112 • jmiller@vnrc.org
- Ben Walsh, Vermont Public Interest Research Group
(802) 223-5221 Ext. 23 • bwalsh@vpirg.org
- Sandy Levine, Conservation Law Foundation
(802) 223-5992 • slevine@clf.org
- Lauren Hierl, Vermont Conservation Voters
(802) 224-9090 • lauren@vermontconservationvoters.org
- Austin Davis, 350Vermont
(802) 370-0408 • austin@350vt.org
- Daniel Barlow, Vermont Businesses for Social Responsibility
(802) 862-8347 • danielb@vbsr.org
- Robb Kidd, Vermont Chapter of the Sierra Club
(802) 505-1540 • robb.kidd@sierraclub.org



Goal: Forest Integrity

The Problem:

Vermont's forested landscape is central to our state's identity and economy. From traditional jobs in the woods, to recreational opportunities for hunters, hikers and anglers, to helping filter and clean our waters, mitigating the effects of climate change, and providing a home for iconic wildlife – healthy forests are an essential asset for Vermont.

Unfortunately, recent studies show our forests are at risk. The legislatively-commissioned *2015 Forest Fragmentation Report*³ developed by the Agency of Natural Resources highlights many of the concerning trends. One important threat stems from the fact that average age of forestland owners in Vermont is greater than 65 years old. With the vast majority (80%) of Vermont's forestland in private ownership, this means that a lot of forested parcels will be changing hands in the coming years. As land changes hands, parcels are often divided up into smaller segments with more landowners. The anticipated large-scale transition of land

ownership in the next twenty years threatens to dramatically change our landscape. Further, the current rate of land development is increasing at twice the rate of our state's population growth, and land use patterns in rural areas – where much of our forestland is concentrated – is leading to the increasing fragmentation of forests.

When forests are fragmented, their overall health and habitat quality declines, resulting in reduced biodiversity, more exotic, invasive species, reduced recreational and hunting access, reduced water quality, and smaller tracts that can't support a working forest economy. Given the current threats to our forests, we have an important opportunity to put in place proactive measures to maintain Vermont's healthy, intact tracts of forest for current and future generations to enjoy.

3 http://fpr.vermont.gov/sites/fpr/files/About_the_Department/News/Library/FOREST%20FRAGMENTATION_FINAL_revo6-03-15.pdf

Proposed Legislative Solutions:

✓ Incentivize landowners to conserve forestland.

- Create incentives for donations of easements on large priority blocks of forests via a pilot program that would provide tax incentives if land is conserved.
- Convene a legislative task force to develop recommendations for a statewide program to improve successional planning assistance for forestland owners in Vermont, since such a large percentage of Vermont's forestland will change ownership in the next 20 years.

✓ Improve land use planning tools and regulations to better protect forests.

- Strengthen state law to improve municipal by-laws and regional planning processes to better address forest blocks and connectivity.
- Update Act 250 to better address forest fragmentation, the maintenance of intact forest blocks, and connectivity.

✓ Increase funding for forest conservation efforts.

- Authorize full statutory funding for the Vermont Housing and Conservation Board.
- Celebrate the 100th Anniversary of Vermont Town Forests by creating a one-time special fund to match locally-raised funding for community-scale Town Forest projects.

✓ Support a sustainable forest economy, including forest-related jobs, recreation, diverse wood products, and more.

- Support the \$1 million allocation for the Working Lands Enterprise Board to fund programs including the Farm and Forest Viability Program.
- Support buying local wood via state-sponsored contracts and state manufacturing and design standards.
- Pursue efforts to reduce worker compensation rates for the forest products sector.
- Support the integrity of the forestry profession by requiring licensing for foresters.

For more information on forest initiatives, contact these experts at partner organizations:

- Jamey Fidel, Vermont Natural Resources Council
(802) 223-2328 Ext. 119 • jfidel@vnrc.org
- Phil Huffman, The Nature Conservancy of Vermont
(802) 229-4425 Ext. 109 • phuffman@tnc.org
- Lauren Hierl, Vermont Conservation Voters
(802) 224-9090 • lauren@vermontconservationvoters.org
- Rodger Krussman, The Trust for Public Land
(802) 371-9286 • rodger.krussman@tpl.org
- Elise Annes, Vermont Land Trust
(802) 262-1206 • elise@vlt.org
- Jim Shallow, Audubon Vermont
(802) 434-3068 • jshallow@audubon.org
- Robb Kidd, Vermont Chapter of the Sierra Club
(802) 505-1540 • robb.kidd@sierraclub.org



Additional Environmental Priorities for 2016

Goal: Protect our working landscape and encourage smart growth development

Vermont's working landscape and the economic vitality of our downtowns and villages set Vermont apart from other states. A variety of regulatory programs and financial incentives – including support for local and regional planning efforts – help us maintain our distinctive character, healthy environment, and vibrant communities. These programs should be protected, and in some instances strengthened.

Legislative Priorities:

- ✓ Maintain current Act 250 criteria while strengthening certain criteria for forests.
- ✓ Maintain the integrity and accessibility of environmental permitting processes.
- ✓ Authorize full statutory funding for the Vermont Housing and Conservation Board, and strong funding for Downtown and Village Tax Credits, Municipal Planning Grants, and the Working Lands Enterprise Fund.

Goal: Healthy wildlife populations

Conserving Vermont's fish, wildlife, and plant species includes protecting the habitats they rely on. Habitat conservation is particularly critical for those populations of species that are already threatened or endangered in Vermont.

Legislative Priorities:

- ✓ Authorize designation of critical habitat under Vermont's endangered and threatened species law.

Goal: Clean Water

Following enactment of the water quality bill (Act 64) in 2015, the legislature must maintain its dedication to protecting and cleaning up our invaluable lakes, rivers, and streams.

Legislative Priorities:

- ✓ Maintain the regulatory and enforcement authorities and funding levels established in Act 64.

Goal: Dam Safety

There are more than 1,200 aging dams in Vermont, many of which provide no cultural, recreational, flood control, or energy benefits to the public. Currently, the state does not require regular safety inspections, so we do not know the condition of many dams across the state, and which ones might pose a potential threat to public safety.

Legislative Priority:

- ✓ Enact a dam registration and inspection program.

Goal: Reduce exposure of people and wildlife to toxic chemicals

Plastic microbeads are used in personal care products such as face washes, creams, shampoos, and toothpastes. These tiny beads end up in our waterways where they are virtually impossible to remove. Once in the water, they attract toxic chemicals like DDT and PCBs. When the beads are eaten by fish, the chemicals bioaccumulate and are passed up the food chain to other wildlife and people. Safer, natural alternatives exist. The House passed a ban on synthetic microbeads (H.4) unanimously in 2015, and the federal government banned microbeads from certain personal care products in 2015.



Legislative Priority:

- ✓ Ban synthetic microbeads from all personal care products sold in Vermont.





Vermont Conservation Voters
P.O. Box 744
Montpelier, VT 05601

