



# Vermont's 2021 Environmental Common Agenda

Your guide to this year's top legislative priorities  
for the environment

Bob LoCicero

**W**e are living through challenging times. We are dealing with an ongoing public health crisis, attacks on our democracy, a long-overdue reckoning with racial justice, and the climate crisis. We also have an economy that is leaving far too many people struggling to put food on their table, and far too many local businesses struggling to stay afloat. Keeping the challenges that people are facing front and center, we can and must fund Vermont's future through strategic investments that will help our communities rebuild from the COVID-19 pandemic in ways that will make us healthier, and our society more equitable and resilient. Forward-looking investments and policies can simultaneously address many of the pressing challenges we face, including these very real, timely needs:

- ✓ **Help people pay less for their transportation, heating, and electricity costs, while creating jobs and addressing the climate crisis.**
- ✓ **Protect public health by reducing people's exposure to toxic chemicals, and hold toxic polluters accountable for the harm they cause.**
- ✓ **Advance environmental justice and equity initiatives.**
- ✓ **Support our downtowns and villages, farms and forest lands, and natural areas.**
- ✓ **Enact policies that foster a healthy democracy.**



## Partner organizations supporting the 2021 Environmental Common Agenda:

Audubon Vermont  
Community Action Works Campaigns  
Connecticut River Conservancy (CRC)  
Conservation Law Foundation (CLF)  
Lake Champlain Committee (LCC)  
Preservation Trust of Vermont

Vermont Businesses for Social Responsibility (VBSR)  
Vermont Chapter of the Sierra Club  
Vermont Conservation Voters (VCV)  
Vermont Interfaith Power & Light (VTIPL)  
Vermont Natural Resources Council (VNRC)  
Vermont Public Interest Research Group (VPIRG)

*The Vermont environmental community's vision for a bright future includes working to advance and defend policies that protect the environment; promote health, civil rights, social, racial and economic justice; and strengthen our democracy.*



### The Environmental Common Agenda is a project of 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, land, wildlife, communities, and health.

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## Goal: Help people pay less for their transportation, heating and electricity costs, while creating jobs and addressing the climate crisis.

**W**e believe that we can and must shape pandemic response and recovery measures that address multiple challenges simultaneously — including public health, affordability, equity, and the climate crisis. By making strategic investments via the state budget, transportation bill, and using federal stimulus funds, we can:

### Help Vermonters save money and have more options for getting where they need to go.

- Significantly increase investments in programs included in the Transportation Modernization Act:
  - Make all Vermont public transit **free** over the long-term, and begin to electrify our bus fleets.
  - Provide **direct incentives** for lower-income Vermonters to buy used vehicles that are more efficient, reliable, and affordable, including hybrid vehicles.
  - Build **electric vehicle infrastructure** in underserved, lower income, and rural locations, including workplaces, multi-unit dwellings, and public charging sites.
  - Provide **alternatives to driving**, by incentivizing motor-assisted bikes, prioritizing improvements to key bicycle corridors and pedestrian infrastructure, and improving the implementation of Complete Streets that are safe for all users.

### Cut costs to heat our homes and small businesses, and create good-paying union jobs.

- Provide **direct incentives to low- and moderate-income Vermonters to weatherize their homes**, which will save them money on their monthly heating bills and make their homes healthier and more comfortable.
- Invest in **workforce training programs** for energy efficiency and green technologies.

### Cut electricity costs for our homes and small businesses.

- Help people and small businesses dig out of this crisis right now by investing in programs that help qualified people and businesses **pay off unpaid utility bills**.
- Invest in programs like Efficiency Vermont's "Free Energy Efficient Products and Appliances" initiative to help people who are paying a large share of their household income toward monthly electric bills to access **free energy efficient products**.
- Invest in programs to help low- and moderate-income Vermonters access renewable energy solutions, like solar.

While one-time funding opportunities from the federal government can help spur investments in these programs this year, the state must also **work toward long-term funding solutions, including through participation in a just and equitable Transportation & Climate Initiative** that prioritizes stakeholder engagement led by members of historically marginalized communities, and program parameters that will lead to improved mobility, air quality, and accessibility while redressing past environmental and public health inequities.

Lawmakers must also continue to **provide oversight and support to the Climate Council** established through the 2020 Global Warming Solutions Act to ensure that the process is well-resourced and stays on track to deliver a strategic, effective, and equitable Climate Action Plan. The planning process must particularly focus on including BIPOC participants and other historically marginalized communities who are not currently included, and we must compensate participants appropriately for their labor on behalf of the state.

### For more information on these strategic climate investments and policy initiatives, contact these experts at partner organizations:

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## Goal: Protect public health by reducing people's exposure to toxic chemicals, and hold toxic polluters accountable for the harm they cause.

Exposure to toxic PFAS chemicals weakens our bodies' immune systems, causes diseases like cancer, and is reported to reduce antibody responses to vaccines — potentially exacerbating the impacts of COVID-19. Lawmakers have an important opportunity to turn off the tap, preventing these harmful PFAS chemicals from being brought into our state by banning their use in products like food packaging, firefighting foam, turnout gear, ski wax, and carpets and rugs. Other states have already taken many of these steps, and retailers and restaurants are moving in this direction. Vermont can take action to ensure our residents are better protected from these harmful chemicals.

Exposure to PFAS chemicals through products that we use is only one part of the problem - their disposal contaminates our communities as well. After PFAS chemicals are imported into our state in the products we buy and use, they continue to cause problems downstream in our wastewater systems, by contaminating the leachate from our landfill as well as the sludge that is then spread on our farmland. Lawmakers should require the state to find better ways to handle PFAS-contaminated sludge - particularly because we know these chemicals are long-lasting and mobile once they are in the environment, and can contaminate our water supplies and wildlife. Lawmakers should also provide oversight of Agency of Natural Resources rulemaking around regulating PFAS chemicals in Vermonters' drinking water and surface waters to ensure that public health is prioritized.

### *Proposed Legislative Solutions:*

- ✓ **Ban toxic PFAS chemicals from food packaging, firefighting foam, ski wax, and carpets and rugs.**
- ✓ **Halt the spreading of PFAS-containing sludge on our lands and into our waters, and provide oversight on Agency of Natural Resources work to regulate toxic PFAS in drinking water and surface waters to ensure the state is doing all it can to protect public health.**
- ✓ **Hold corporate polluters responsible for paying the medical monitoring costs for victims of toxic contamination.**

Finally, legislators should enact legislation to ensure corporate polluters pay for the harm they cause — rather than taxpayers or victims. By allowing Vermonters to access medical monitoring for diseases linked to toxic contamination, we can ensure people exposed to harmful chemicals can catch diseases as early as possible. The burden of paying for that medical care should be covered by the entity that caused that chemical exposure.

### **For more information on toxic chemical reform policies, contact these experts at partner organizations:**

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## Goal: Advance environmental justice and equity initiatives.

Nationally and in Vermont, due to structural racism, Black, Indigenous, and People of Color have had less access to land, homes, and equity; have disproportionately borne the impacts of pollution; and have far too often been left out of policy decisions that impact their lives. Environmental policy must work to rectify the structural racism that has created these disparities, while proactively supporting people who have been historically marginalized. This work also needs to listen to, and follow the lead of, recommendations coming from the **Vermont Native American Commission and Abenaki tribal leadership**. Multiple bills are currently being developed by and with BIPOC

experts - including through the work of Vermont Renews, the Vermont Releaf Collective, REJOICE, and others — to advance environmental justice and equity, including the **BIPOC Land Access and Opportunity Act** and the **Environmental Justice Act** legislation, and we urge the Legislature to take them up and move them forward. We also support **increased funding and staffing for the Office of Racial Equity** to expand their work to identify and address systemic racial disparities in state government. We are committed to embedding these values in all of our work and will center the priorities identified by these constituencies.

## Goal: Update Act 250 to better address climate change, integrate equity, promote Vermont's traditional settlement patterns, and protect forests and river corridors.

Vermont's landmark land-use law, Act 250, has shaped the land and communities of our state — from historic compact community centers surrounded by working lands, to important natural areas that support outdoor recreation, wildlife, clean air and water. Starting in 2017, a legislative commission worked for two years to evaluate options for improving Act 250 as it approached its 50th anniversary. That commission was followed by two more years of legislative review of proposals to update the law to better meet today's challenges — climate change, forest fragmentation, water quality, and equity among them. Comprehensive legislation moved through the Vermont House last year, but once the pandemic struck, only a narrow package

focused on forest protections and recreational trails passed the Senate — and, unfortunately, was vetoed by Gov. Scott.

Updating and improving Act 250 is important unfinished business that must be addressed to help Vermont move forward. The environmental community is focused this year on supporting policies that have been thoroughly reviewed over the last several years and have significant legislative support. These policies include protecting intact forest blocks to prevent forest fragmentation; improving protections for river corridors; enacting provisions that directly address climate change; and better incorporating diversity and equity principles into the law.



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## Goal: Support our downtowns and villages, farms and forest lands, and natural areas.

As we rebuild from the pandemic, we have a unique opportunity to leverage federal funds to dramatically increase our investment in programs that build

affordable housing in smart growth locations, spur rural economic development, and protect our working lands and natural areas.

### *Proposed Legislative Solutions:*

- ✓ Support the Governor’s proposal of \$34.8M for the Vermont Housing and Conservation Board in FY22.
- ✓ Provide full statutory funding for the Municipal and Regional Planning Fund, which supports regional planning commissions and provides grants to communities.
- ✓ Significantly increase funding for Downtown and Village Tax Credits and the Working Lands Enterprise Fund.
- ✓ Increase investments in innovative water and wastewater infrastructure solutions needed to promote housing and commercial development in communities of all sizes.

## Goal: Reduce plastic pollution.

Building on important work done in recent years to ban specific single-use products, we must continue to develop and implement strategies to reduce the amount of waste we generate, and improve how we manage waste. As underscored by the legislatively-created Single Use Products Working Group, our current use and disposal patterns are inefficient, expensive, and produce harmful pollution – including climate pollution and toxic chemicals that leach into our waters. The Vermont Legislature mandated recycling and composting in Act 148. We must maintain our commitment to this important legislation while pursuing complementary policies to reduce our reliance on single-use plastics and harmful alternatives, continue to work to improve statewide recycling and composting rates, and modernize our successful “Bottle Bill.”

### *Proposed Legislative Solutions:*

- ✓ Update the “Bottle Bill” to cover a wider range of beverages available on the market, and increase the deposit from a nickel to a dime.
- ✓ Explore new policies like recycled content standards and Extended Producer Responsibility to reduce waste, toxicity of the waste stream, and the use of virgin materials.



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## Goal: Ensure clean water for all.

Vermont must continue the progress it has made in funding clean water programs, and make headway on issues that continue to pose threats to Vermont's rivers, streams, wetlands, lakes and ponds. Farm pollution continues to be a significant threat to water quality. We recognize that our agricultural system — particularly the conventional dairy industry — has been hit hard by the pandemic, after years of challenging conditions from competitive global markets and low milk prices. Agriculture and local food are important parts of Vermont's landscape and culture. We stand ready to work with Vermont lawmakers, farmers, and other stakeholders on how we can shift the state's agricultural system to a more economically and ecologically sustainable, regenerative system. This requires effective implementation and enforcement of state clean water laws, evaluating potential investments in ecosystem services, pursuing land buyouts for marginal farmland, and supporting farms to transition to regenerative organic practices.

Additionally, Vermont continues to see a loss of wetlands and adverse impacts to river corridors and floodplains. We believe that by investing in and protecting natural systems like wetlands and river corridors, we can restore water quality for the benefit

of all Vermonters, support our tourism and outdoor recreation economies, protect high-quality habitat for fish and wildlife, slow climate change by storing carbon, and reduce downstream flood risks.

### *Proposed Legislative Solutions:*

- ✓ Fully fund clean water programs, including the Clean Water Fund.
- ✓ Transfer programs that regulate agricultural water pollution from the Agency of Agricultural Foods and Markets (AAFM) to the Agency of Natural Resources (ANR), in order to better protect our resources and save the state money on duplicative programs.
- ✓ Evaluate the status of protection for natural systems including wetlands, river corridors, floodplains and forests and work toward legislation to better protect these resources.

## Goal: Foster a healthy democracy.

We believe the long-term health of our planet is inextricably linked with the health of our democracy. At the federal level, Supreme Court decisions have opened the floodgates of political contributions from wealthy special interests and gutted key voter protections. Fortunately, Vermont has worked hard to increase access to the ballot box via policies like same-day voter registration and automatic voter registration. Due to the pandemic, the state mailed all active registered voters their ballot for the November elections — and saw record-breaking turnout. With its proven success at increasing voter participation, we believe this practice should be made permanent for all general elections in Vermont.

### *Proposed Legislative Solution:*

- ✓ Make universal vote-by-mail permanent for all general elections, with a particular focus on working to ensure voting access for historically marginalized communities.



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