



Vermont's 2024 Environmental Common Agenda

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

Over the past year, Vermonters experienced firsthand the growing threats to our communities posed by the climate crisis, including devastating flooding and polluted air due to wildfires. The urgency for climate action continues to build. The policy priorities outlined in this year's *Environmental Common Agenda* are pivotal solutions needed to address these complex challenges.

This year's agenda focuses on advancing clean energy for all, and building climate resilience by improving protections for our watersheds, including rivers, streams, and wetlands, and by addressing dam safety. We identify strategies to pay for climate mitigation and resilience by holding fossil fuel companies accountable, and by establishing funding structures to better leverage state and federal funds. We also promote smart growth housing solutions that help alleviate the housing shortage while better protecting our intact forest blocks and other critical resources. Finally, we identify steps the Legislature must take to reduce Vermonters' exposure to toxic chemicals, implement the state's Environmental Justice Law, finish the work of updating the Bottle Bill, and ensure a healthy democracy for all.

We are calling on Vermont lawmakers to:

✓ **Cut climate pollution and enhance the resilience of our communities:**

- Build climate resilience by **better protecting our river corridors, streams and wetlands**, and by addressing dam safety.
- **Hold fossil fuel companies accountable** for helping pay for the damage their products have caused in Vermont.
- **Update the Renewable Energy Standard** to achieve 100% renewable energy and ensure development of significantly more new renewables.
- **Make significant investments** in climate resilience, environmental justice, clean transportation, and other critical environmental initiatives.

✓ **Modernize Act 250** with policies to allow more housing development in compact community centers, paired with better protections for forests and other natural resources.

✓ **Promote a healthier Vermont:**

- **Ban toxic chemicals** like PFAS from personal care products, textiles and artificial turf, and pass a pollinator protection bill to ban neonicotinoid-treated seeds.
- **Enact Bottle Bill modernization** by overriding the gubernatorial veto.
- Advance policies that promote a **healthy democracy**.



Partner organizations supporting the 2024 Environmental Common Agenda:

Audubon Vermont
 Connecticut River Conservancy (CRC)
 Conservation Law Foundation (CLF)
 Lake Champlain Committee (LCC)
 Preservation Trust of Vermont
 Renewable Energy Vermont (REV)
 Rights & Democracy (RAD)
 Slingshot
 The Vermont Climate & Health Alliance
 Trust for Public Land (TPL)

Third Act Vermont
 Vermont Council of Trout Unlimited
 350VT
 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; bolster strong communities; and strengthen our democracy.



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

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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Build Climate Resilience by Reducing the Risk of Future Flooding

The climate crisis is already threatening the health and well-being of our communities, and we must work swiftly and strategically to strengthen our resilience. One critical area of work includes reducing the risk of future flooding. Fortunately, there are a number of steps Vermont can take this year. Policy solutions include better regulating new development in river corridors so we are not putting future developments at risk and exacerbating downstream flooding. We must also advance our work to better protect riparian vegetation along streams. Further, wetlands play a vital role by helping control flooding, minimizing erosion, purifying water, and offering habitat for plants and wildlife. Vermont has lost an estimated 35% of our wetlands, and must enact a “net gain” policy to protect and restore these critical features on our landscape. Dams also play an important role in flood mitigation, with flood control dams that need more consistent state oversight, inspections, and maintenance, and numerous small dams that exacerbate flooding and should be removed.

In confronting the challenges posed by our changing climate, we must secure revenue streams to invest in resilience initiatives. We must hold the largest fossil fuel companies accountable for helping pay for the damage their products have caused in Vermont. We must simultaneously identify immediate revenue streams to put into a climate resilience fund. Further, significant federal funding is available for these types of projects, and Vermont needs to build the infrastructure and capacity to ensure we can successfully apply for and leverage federal funding opportunities to the maximum degree possible.

Proposed legislative solutions:

- ✓ **Better protect river corridors** by implementing statewide regulations to safeguard river ecosystems, keep future development out of harm’s way, and use natural systems to mitigate flood risks.
- ✓ **Implement a wetland “net gain” policy** to better protect and restore these vital resources to enhance flood resilience.
- ✓ **Improve dam safety** by consolidating oversight and strengthening maintenance requirements for dam owners, while investing in the strategic removal of dams that exacerbate flooding and pose a risk to public safety.
- ✓ **Invest in Climate Resilience:**
 - Hold fossil fuel companies accountable for helping pay for the damage their products have caused in Vermont.
 - Create a Climate Resilience Fund that can help Vermont communities immediately invest in resilience projects, and create a Vermont Green Bank structure to maximize uptake of currently-available federal funds for resilience initiatives.



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Cut Climate Pollution and Invest in Clean and Equitable Energy Solutions

As Vermont confronts the escalating impacts of the climate crisis, we must expedite implementation of the strategies outlined in the state's Climate Action Plan. In addition to climate resilience initiatives, we must also maintain our focus on cutting climate pollution and helping all Vermonters access clean energy solutions.

We must transition swiftly to a cleaner electric portfolio with significantly more new in-state and regional renewable energy. We must continue to explore clean energy sources such as geothermal energy. We should divest state pension funds from fossil fuels to both reduce investments in the fossil fuel industry and help ensure healthy state pension funds. Further, we need to continue to invest in clean transportation solutions such as electric vehicles, transit and micro-transit, and bike and pedestrian infrastructure. The Legislature should also explore pathways for Vermont to participate in cap-and-invest or similar regulatory programs to cut the largest source of climate pollution in Vermont and build a statewide transportation system that is more cost-effective, multi-modal and accessible to all Vermonters.

We must simultaneously work to address the disproportionate energy burden faced by many Vermonters. Lower-income and historically overburdened communities bear the brunt of high energy costs, including the expensive reliance on fossil fuels. The state must take active steps to make sure the most vulnerable Vermonters

Proposed legislative solutions:

- ✓ **Cleaner Electricity:** Update the Renewable Energy Standard to require 100% total renewable energy by 2030, and far more new, renewable energy generation in Vermont and in our region that is well-sited and prioritizes lower-income, historically overburdened Vermonters in accessing that clean energy.
- ✓ **Invest in critical environmental initiatives,** including **cleaner transportation** solutions, such as more efficient and electric vehicles, and other needed transit, micro-transit, and bike and pedestrian infrastructure; work to identify more sustainable long-term funding sources to support a modern and equitable multi-modal transportation system; and invest in the **Environmental Justice (EJ) program**, including providing higher per diems for participants serving on government boards and commissions, such as the EJ Advisory Council.

can participate in the transition to cleaner and more affordable options as we work to meet the legal targets of the Global Warming Solutions Act, including examining ratepayer protection strategies. And, importantly, this work must include increased investment in the state's Environmental Justice program to ensure its principles and policies underpin the work of state agencies.

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Encourage Smart Growth Housing Development Paired with Better Protections for Natural and Working Lands

Act 250 has helped shape the Vermont we love today. But, the program is more than 50 years old and should be updated to better meet today's challenges, including climate change, forest fragmentation, and increasing the availability of affordable, smart growth housing. The Legislature has been examining how to modernize Act 250 for a number of years and it's time to act.

Act 250 can be reformed to better address our housing shortage while simultaneously protecting our natural resources and communities. We support a range of solutions to modernize Act 250, including provisions to update which projects go through the review process based on updated criteria like location and potential impacts on important resources. Act 250 can better address forest fragmentation, as the legislature has supported for a number of years. Further, we must integrate considerations of potential climate impacts of a project. An updated Act 250 can also ensure state, regional, and local planning goals are better aligned to promote smart growth and minimize community impacts. Modernization can also improve the process that applicants go through to ensure better consistency and timely advancement of projects, while bringing in more expertise and maintaining local public engagement in the process.



Proposed legislative solutions:

- ✓ **Modernize Act 250:** Support sustainable development in downtowns and village centers while better protecting forests and other critical natural resources.
- ✓ **Expand funding** and eligibility for downtown and village tax credits, and increase funding for the Vermont Housing and Conservation Board (VHCB) to build more smart growth housing.

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Protect Vermonters' Health and Our Democracy

Protect Vermonters' Health

Exposure to toxic chemicals like PFAS (per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances) can cause diseases like cancer and contaminate our environment. In 2023, the Vermont Senate unanimously advanced legislation to ban PFAS and other dangerous chemicals from personal care products, such as shampoos, lotions, and cosmetics, and menstrual products, and to ban PFAS from textiles and artificial turf. This legislation will reduce our exposure to harmful chemicals while using these products in our homes, and also reduce the amount of toxic contamination that eventually ends up in our air, water, and soil. Relatedly, pesticides like neonicotinoids harm pollinators like birds and bees and may threaten human health as well, and Vermont needs to do more to limit the use of these chemicals in our state.

We must also continue to develop and implement strategies to reduce the amount of waste we generate, and improve how we manage our waste. The Legislature recognized this need by passing legislation to modernize the Bottle Bill, but it was unfortunately vetoed by the Governor. We are calling on the legislature to override this veto and enact this important policy.

Proposed legislative solutions:

- ✓ **Protect public health by restricting the use of PFAS** and other harmful chemicals from products including personal care products, menstrual products, textiles, and artificial turf.
- ✓ Pass a **pollinator protection bill** to ban neonicotinoid-treated seeds.
- ✓ **Override the gubernatorial veto of the modernized "Bottle Bill,"** which would expand the program to cover a wider range of beverages to reduce waste, cut plastic pollution, and increase recycling.

Promote a Healthy Democracy

The health of our environment is tightly linked with the health of our democracy. At the federal level, Supreme Court decisions continue to undermine democracy by gutting the Voting Rights Act, and allowing unchecked political contributions from wealthy special interests. Vermont can build on its record of cultivating a healthy democracy by working to reduce the influence of outside spending, and advancing ranked choice voting, which fosters better civic discourse during elections and helps encourage more candidates to run.

Proposed legislative solutions:

- ✓ **Ban corporate contributions** to candidates for public office.
- ✓ **Adopt ranked choice voting (RCV)** for presidential primaries and allow municipalities to implement RCV for local elections.





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