

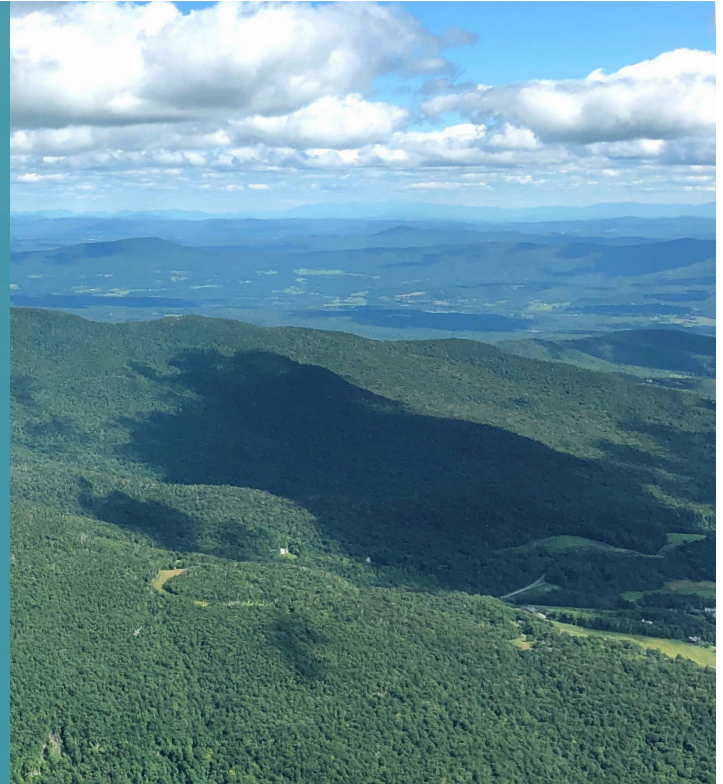
# Vermont Land Conservation: Getting it right

## THE TAKEAWAY

Vermont has an impressive record when it comes to land conservation, but the work is not done. Additional conservation can protect our environment and reduce the impact of climate change while strengthening our rural economy and quality of life.

Charitable individuals can help by supporting efforts that:

- Improve water quality
- Increase the health of Vermont's forests
- Build public access to the natural landscape



**THIS SPRING THE VERMONT LEGISLATURE** passed a bill that sets an ambitious goal for conservation. It calls for 30 percent of Vermont's land to be conserved by 2030 and 50 percent by 2050.

Advocates for the law estimate about 24 percent of the state's land base is conserved now but they acknowledge this figure is somewhat fuzzy. One of the law's first directives is to establish an accurate inventory and measure progress from there.

The political debate was about more than counting acreage, though. The discussion about the 30/50 goal helped crystallize the benefits of conservation and also

dug into the dilemmas. Among them: At a time when Vermont is starved for new housing, should the state embrace new rounds of conservation that protect land from development?

The consensus from elected representatives and state officials was yes. The roadblocks to housing aren't that Vermont is protecting forests and watersheds, said Trey Martin, director of conservation and rural community development at the Vermont Housing & Conservation Board, a state government entity that works to create affordable new homes and protect land. "It's working with communities and understanding how and where to site things, and what processes should be involved."

Careful conservation can help direct housing to designated growth centers and reduce the potential for McMansions to sprout up on prime agricultural lands, for example. Land protection also helps strengthen rural economies by ensuring acreage is available for farming, maple sugaring, sustainable logging, and recreation that supports public enjoyment and Vermont's \$3 billion annual tourism industry.



The effort to [address climate change](#) also counts on conserved land to serve as "green infrastructure" that sponges up heavy rain, reduces flood damage, and sequesters carbon from the atmosphere. A mature tree can suck 48 pounds of carbon dioxide annually from the air.

Consideration of all these benefits should guide conservation decisions so that Vermont protects land that "delivers the most value, for the most people," said Tracy Zschau, interim president of the Vermont Land Trust. "I think in Vermont, development and conservation can and should be in balance."

Recognizing the benefits of land conservation and good land stewardship, the Vermont Community Foundation is working to increase the impact of giving in this area. "Our communities, environment, and economy are threatened by the changing climate. VCF is helping to address these challenges by providing support to organizations that promote vibrant communities and a healthy natural environment, while encouraging long

term economic vitality in Vermont," said Kate Neubauer, program officer for Climate & Environment at the Vermont Community Foundation.

### **Charitable individuals can accelerate progress by supporting efforts to:**

#### **Protect watersheds**

Vermont has more than 500,000 acres of lakes, ponds, rivers, brooks, and wetlands. The health of this life-sustaining resource is directly related to what happens on Vermont's 6 million acres of land. To that end, nonprofit organizations around the state are working on conservation and stewardship to protect Vermont watersheds, often with the help of deeply committed local volunteers.

"Because they are embedded in their communities, they can have more of an impact," said Lyn Munno, director of Watersheds United Vermont, a Montpelier nonprofit that helps water quality groups around the state maximize their impact.

The work takes many forms: Creating land buffers of native plants along waterways to soak up sediment, herbicide, and manure run-off; protecting alpine brooks; and training volunteer water quality testers to monitor noxious algae blooms.

**No matter where you live on the landscape you can have an impact on your watershed and our waters.**

The Vermont Community Foundation supports local watershed groups around the state that are working to protect the most vulnerable communities downstream and in floodplains, as we continue the legacy work of the High Meadows Fund.

This funding has helped the White River Partnership protect river corridors and assemble volunteers to pull tires out of the water, and supported work by Friends of the Mad River to mitigate flood damage with better road culverts. It has also helped the Lake Champlain Basin Program encourage good stewardship with programs such as Stream Wise. The good news for charitable individuals?

“No matter where you live on the landscape you can have an impact on your watershed and our waters,” Munno said.



### Improve the health of Vermont forests

Forests cover around 74 percent of Vermont’s landscape. Although this number has ticked downward in recent years due to development, the state remains among the most forested places in the United States.

Managing this important resource falls largely on private property holders, who own about 80 percent of Vermont forestland, said Kate Forrer, executive director of the nonprofit Vermont Woodlands Association in Rupert.

The organization works with forest landowners statewide to promote good stewardship. Sometimes this means lining up a consulting forester to help landowners inventory unique features or design a plan to protect wildlife corridors.

“They come to us and say: ‘We love this property, and we want to do right by the land. How do we do that,’” Forrer explained.

For some the answer is permanent conservation, especially of forest blocks to counter fragmentation now taking place from development. But with or without easements, there are good strategies to manage forests. The Woodlands Association sponsors the Vermont Tree Farm Program with support from VCF’s Forest Health and Integrity Initiative. The voluntary certification program, which ties into a national effort, recognizes property owners who commit to best practices around soil protection, wildlife habitat, and forest biodiversity. “It really allows people to showcase their commitment to good stewardship,” Forrer said.

### Build public access to recreation and nature

Vermont’s spectacular natural landscape is even more beautiful when people can get close to it. That can mean jumping into a swimming hole, identifying wildflowers in a town forest, or picnicking on a village hilltop.

Conservation that increases public access to green spaces builds physical health and also creates social connections. “When we conserve and protect places that draw people, the impact is tremendous,” said Martin, at the Vermont Housing & Conservation Board.

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Many nonprofits help conserve land that is relatively close to Vermont cities and town centers, which,



when done strategically, can both allow room for development and make compact settlements more appealing because there is access to green space. No one wants to live in a growth center that feels like a cement island.

The Vermont Nature Conservancy’s protection of Chickering Bog allows visitors to listen for barred owls and stroll the boardwalk just 15 minutes from Montpelier. Near Brattleboro, walkers and hikers can easily access 27 miles of public trails conserved by the Windmill Hill Pinnacle Association. Near Bennington, visitors to the Merck Forest & Farmland Center in Rupert can take courses in chainsaw safety and logging or wander the meadows.

But more places like these are needed. One growing movement in conservation is to recognize that some neighborhoods are “recreational deserts” with scant access to trails, parks, or other outdoor spaces. Environmental justice recognizes that people of all income levels and backgrounds deserve access, and not just those who can afford a \$600 mountain bike. “That is a place where we have work to do. Are we building conservation and recreation opportunities that all members of the community want to access?” Martin said.

**When we protect land, we’re protecting ourselves.**

It’s also past time to support BIPOC farm and land sovereignty efforts. The Northeast Farmers of Color Land Trust recently took ownership of the North Thetford Church with help from the Vermont Land Trust and hopes to use it for a range of activities, including providing farmers with a commercial kitchen to create value-added products.

This is just one example of good work on this front, and a reminder of the need for more.

Ultimately the health of the land directly relates to the health of human beings. So, when we protect land, Martin said: “We’re protecting ourselves.”

### Join us in supporting this work

- 1 Ready to open a fund so you can support this work in partnership with us? [Click here](#) to learn more about opening a donor advised fund at the Vermont Community Foundation or to connect with a philanthropic advisor.
- 2 Have a donor advised fund with us? [Click here](#) to support land conservation through our Climate & Environment Opportunity in your DonorCentral account.
- 3 Want to learn more about our strategies and grantmaking to expand support for land conservation? [Visit](#) our Climate & Environment page.

### Deeper reading:

[Community Strategies for Vermont’s Forests and Wildlife](#)

[Vermont Conservation Design Report](#)

*For additional recommendations about giving in Vermont, reach out to the Vermont Community Foundation philanthropy team at [philanthropy@vermontcf.org](mailto:philanthropy@vermontcf.org) or (802) 388-3355 opt. 5 to be connected with staff who can help.*

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