

Project Name and Location:

Bennington County Conservation Action Plan
Bennington County, Vermont

Map:

A map delineating proposed conservation areas included as Appendix A. The service area includes the following towns:

- Rupert
- Dorset
- Peru
- Landgrove
- Sandgate
- Manchester
- Winhall
- Arlington
- Sunderland
- Shaftsbury
- Glastenbury
- Bennington
- Woodford
- Searsburg
- Pownal
- Stamford
- Readsboro

Introduction

Bennington County is experiencing a convergence of longstanding and emerging land management challenges. These include increasingly erratic and severe weather, persistent soil degradation linked to historical land use, heightened flood and drought risk, reliance on imported food, and diminishing farm viability. These conditions not only threaten the ecological integrity of the region, but also jeopardize the economic and social sustainability of its agricultural communities.

These challenges were brought into focus through the locally led process conducted by the Bennington County Conservation District (BCCD). Through community forums, landowner surveys, partner listening sessions, and technical workgroup analysis, local stakeholders elevated concerns related to unpredictable weather events, rising flood risks, growing food insecurity, and the tenuous economic outlook for farms. BCCD's technical staff and NRCS partners translated these community-identified concerns into a set of formal NRCS resource concerns that now guide the Conservation Action Plan: degraded plant condition, soil quality limitations, livestock production limitations, wind and water erosion, and declining terrestrial habitat quality.

The Conservation Action Plan (CAP) addresses these challenges head-on through a practical and results-driven approach. It proposes contracting 1,000 acres for the implementation of agroforestry and supporting conservation practices by 2031 to restore productive capacity, reduce risk, and strengthen the long-term sustainability of local agriculture. While contracts will be secured by 2031, final implementation and maintenance activities may extend through 2036 to ensure full establishment and ecological function. This effort is grounded in evidence-based strategies that directly respond to the identified resource concerns—enhancing plant vitality, rebuilding soil structure and fertility, integrating livestock into resilient systems, protecting against erosion, and creating vital wildlife corridors.

Through targeted investments in land stewardship, demonstration plots, and workforce training, the CAP offers a proactive path forward that leverages local partnerships, NRCS programs, and community knowledge. It represents a commonsense solution to protect Bennington County's agricultural economy and natural resources while promoting dependable, self-reliant land use systems.

District Conservationist Contact:

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Collaborating Partners:

Bennington County Conservation District (BCCD), NRCS, VAAF, ANR, USDA Rural Development, BFFI, Hildene, Merck Forest, Smokey House Center, Bennington County Regional Commission, Yellowbud Farm, Breadtree Farm, Grateful Morning Farm, Bennington Veteran Incubator Farm

Problem Statement

Bennington County faces a complex and growing set of environmental and agricultural challenges that are threatening the long-term viability of its working lands and local economy. Increasingly variable and severe weather events have led to widespread water quality degradation and frequent flooding. These conditions are compounded by decades of land use practices that have left soils degraded and stripped of perennial groundcover, making them more vulnerable to erosion and less capable of supporting productive agriculture.

The impacts are felt county-wide, but are especially pronounced in working landscapes and flood-prone areas where the intersection of poor runoff management, insufficient conservation infrastructure, and limited technical and workforce capacity has created significant resource concerns. These include poor soil health, declining livestock productivity, and growing food insecurity driven by overdependence on imported food sources.

It is estimated that at least 1,000 acres across the county would benefit from targeted conservation intervention. Vulnerable watersheds and degraded soils across this treatment area represent an opportunity to implement proactive, place-based solutions that protect natural resources while revitalizing the local agricultural economy.

The Conservation Action Plan (CAP) responds to these concerns with a coordinated, long-term strategy focused on restoring land function and farm viability. By implementing agroforestry and related conservation practices across 1,000 acres by 2031, the CAP aims to enhance flood resilience, restore soil and plant health, support livestock systems, and improve food and habitat resources. This plan offers a pragmatic, evidence-backed approach to ensuring that Bennington County's agricultural lands remain productive, profitable, and resilient for generations to come.

Goals and Objectives

Bennington County's Conservation Action Plan seeks to holistically address environmental degradation, disaster risk, and long-term food and water security by leveraging agroforestry as a nature-based risk reduction strategy. Recent scientific evaluations underscore agroforestry's unique ability to reduce all three components of disaster risk—hazard, exposure, and vulnerability—by altering hydrological cycles, providing critical ecosystem services, and strengthening the adaptive capacities of both natural and human communities (Janzen et al., 2024; Dobhal et al., 2024).

To enhance regional water management, the plan targets the installation of 1,000 acres of agroforestry and runoff mitigation practices by 2031. Agroforestry's capacity to increase water infiltration and reduce surface runoff has been shown to significantly mitigate flood intensity and duration, as documented in global assessments and Working Trees research (USDA NAC, 2016; Dobhal et al., 2024). This hydrologic buffering not only curtails downstream impacts but also improves water availability during dry periods by enhancing soil moisture retention.

Soil health restoration is a central focus, pursued by building soil organic matter and supporting microbial and faunal diversity through tree-crop-livestock systems. Agroforestry improves nutrient cycling and soil structure, contributing to both short-term productivity and long-term land stewardship. Literature shows that tree cover moderates extreme soil temperature fluctuations and enhances evapotranspiration efficiency, providing a favorable microclimate for crops even under extreme heat or drought (Dobhal et al., 2024).

A key goal is to strengthen food system reliability by diversifying production through perennial species. Agroforestry systems increase food and income stability by producing multiple outputs—food, fiber, fuel, and medicinal products—while also buffering producers against market and weather-related shocks. Studies demonstrate agroforestry's capacity to safeguard yield under adverse weather conditions, providing 5–15% higher crop yields and offering alternate harvests from tree components in times of field crop failure (Dobhal et al., 2024).

The plan also positions agroforestry as a cornerstone of local stewardship and practical conservation. By 2031, the integration of 1,000 acres of agroforestry is expected to measurably reduce flood vulnerability, supported by monitoring frameworks that assess changes in ecosystem service provision and environmental exposure. This comprehensive, commonsense approach to land management aligns with proven practices for risk reduction and long-term productivity (Janzen et al., 2024).

To build long-term capacity, at least 6 individuals will receive training in agroforestry and disaster risk reduction strategies. Training will combine technical content with hands-on implementation, enabling practitioners to plan, establish, and monitor productive land use approaches tailored to local conditions. This workforce will be key to scaling benefits across public, private, and working lands.

Finally, 50 acres of demonstration plots will function as living laboratories and public engagement sites. These areas will highlight real-time benefits of agroforestry—reduced runoff, improved soil conditions, and increased biodiversity—while enabling peer learning and supporting regional replication.

Alternatives

In addressing Bennington County’s mounting environmental pressures, a range of strategic alternatives were evaluated. Maintaining the status quo—continuing existing land use practices without major intervention—would preserve current trajectories of soil erosion, surface runoff, and dependence on imported food. As supported by recent risk-reduction and agroforestry literature, this path risks escalating flood hazards, drought vulnerability, and ecological degradation, particularly as severe weather extremes intensify (USDA NAC, 2016; Dobhal et al., 2024).

A second approach considered partial implementation of conservation practices, such as limited riparian buffers or erosion control structures. While potentially beneficial in localized contexts, this option fails to capture the synergistic effects of integrated land management. Research confirms that isolated measures do not address the full scope of land-based risks or provide the multi-layered benefits achievable through holistic systems like agroforestry (Janzen et al., 2024).

The preferred alternative is full-scale implementation of the Conservation Action Plan (CAP), integrating agroforestry and complementary NRCS conservation practices across 1,000 acres by 2031. This strategy is grounded in evidence that agroforestry reduces land-based risk on multiple fronts: by increasing infiltration and stabilizing hydrology, reducing exposure to flood-prone zones, and enhancing system-wide reliability against heat, drought, and erosion. Recent global assessments emphasize that agroforestry systems consistently outperform monocultures in stabilizing yields, buffering against extreme weather, and maintaining productive capacity during high-impact events (Dobhal et al., 2024). By pursuing a coordinated, landscape-scale implementation, the CAP aims to transform Bennington County into a model of resilient, working lands conservation.

NEPA Considerations:

Most NRCS-supported practices will require environmental screening or NEPA documentation, particularly for new infrastructure (e.g., ponds, roads, nurseries).

Proposed Solution and Actions

The preferred solution is the full implementation of the Conservation Action Plan (CAP), which combines technical assistance, infrastructure support, and local leadership to achieve 1,000 acres of agroforestry and complementary conservation practices by 2031. This solution will be supported through existing USDA programs like EQIP and CSP, alongside the development of demonstration plots, peer-to-peer learning networks, and community-scale nurseries. These elements are designed to accelerate adoption, share practical knowledge, and ensure lasting impact across the region's working landscapes.

This approach is grounded in three years of stakeholder input, regional conservation planning, and a growing body of national research. The CAP not only restores ecological function but also builds economic resilience by integrating land stewardship with workforce development and food system improvement. Scientific research confirms that converting 1,000 acres to agroforestry could reduce surface runoff by 20–50% and increase water infiltration by up to 59% (Dobhal et al., 2024; USDA NAC, 2016). In flood-prone areas of Bennington County, this could translate to a 10–20% reduction in localized flood frequency and up to a 30% reduction in flood intensity over the life of the plan (Janzen et al., 2024). These improvements help protect farms, reduce damage to roads and infrastructure, and cut emergency management costs.

The anticipated benefits of this strategy include improved soil and water conditions, greater farm viability, and long-term productivity. It is also expected to increase rural employment through direct implementation and ongoing maintenance of conservation practices. Cost estimates are still under development, but expenses are expected to be met through a mix of federal, state, and private funding, including technical support and cost-share mechanisms already in place.

Key conservation actions are drawn from a targeted suite of practices prioritized in the Local Fund Pool. These include:

- **Silvopasture**, addressing degraded plant condition, erosion, and livestock production limitations through tree establishment and managed grazing.
- **Alley Cropping**, enhancing degraded soils and protecting water quality on cropland through integrated tree-crop systems.
- **Forest Farming**, applied on forest and agroforestry lands (AAL), focused on degraded vegetation and terrestrial habitat enhancement.
- **Riparian Forest Buffers**, particularly for flood-prone croplands and pastures, to reduce runoff and restore habitat.
- **Hedgerow Planting**, buffering field edges and supporting pollinator and wildlife habitat.
- **Windbreak and Shelterbelt Establishment**, controlling wind and water erosion on exposed croplands and pastures.

Each practice integrates NRCS technical standards and is supported by locally identified priorities, including infrastructure needs, education, and equipment access. Non-cost-shared initiatives such as equipment sharing programs, incubator farms for beginning producers, and educational demonstration sites will further enhance accessibility and impact. Together, these

interventions represent a scalable and practical path forward for improving Bennington County's land, livelihoods, and long-term resilience.

Partnerships and Other Funding Sources

The success of the Conservation Action Plan relies on a diverse set of partners bringing technical capacity, financial resources, and place-based experience. Core implementation will be led by the Bennington County Conservation District (BCCD) in collaboration with the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), the Vermont Agency of Agriculture, Food & Markets (VAAFM), the Farm Service Agency (FSA), and USDA Rural Development. Additional contributions will come from the Vermont Land Trust, local farms and landowners, and community-based organizations such as the Black Farmer Fund Initiative (BFFI).

NRCS will provide the primary technical assistance and cost-share funding under the EQIP and CSP programs. VAAFM will support matching cost-share resources through potential CEAP-supported expansion equipment cooperative to increase producer access to necessary tools. FSA and USDA Rural Development will assist with financing for infrastructure such as irrigation systems, seasonal high tunnels, and storage or processing facilities tied to conservation outcomes.

BCCD and local partners will coordinate education, outreach, and peer support networks to ensure landowners are engaged and informed throughout the implementation process. This includes in-kind staffing for workshops, demonstration plot tours, and one-on-one technical support.

The CAP prioritizes projects in high-impact and flood-prone areas but aims for broad participation across cropland, pasture, agroforestry, and forest farming systems. Program enrollment will be driven through targeted outreach, transparent cost-share terms, and flexible scheduling that supports producer-led timelines.

The total cost of full implementation is currently under development and will be modeled using NRCS payment schedules and local match estimates. A blended funding structure—combining federal conservation incentives, state-level support, private philanthropy, and landowner contributions—is expected to ensure both short-term deliverables and long-term sustainability.

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Achieving the 1,000-acre goal will require broad participation across cropland, pasture, agroforestry, and forest farming systems. Program enrollment will be driven through targeted outreach, transparent cost-share terms, and flexible scheduling that supports producer-led timelines.

The total cost of full implementation is estimated based on detailed per-acre cost calculations drawn from representative example projects. A blended funding structure—combining federal conservation incentives, state-level support, private philanthropy, and landowner contributions—is expected to ensure both short-term deliverables and long-term sustainability.

Estimated Per-Acre Implementation Costs Based on Local Fund Pool Cost Calculator:

To support budgeting and planning under this Conservation Action Plan, actual per-acre costs were compiled from four detailed example projects. These examples provide the following cost benchmarks:

Practice Type	Cost per Acre	Description/Assumptions
Silvopasture	\$6,285.00	Includes fencing, tree planting, site prep, weed control, and labor
Alley Cropping (Hay)	\$3,001.81	Tree row establishment with hay integration and weed management
Alley Cropping (Apple/Aronia)	\$32,497.00	High-density planting of apple and aronia, composting, and trellising

Forest Farming	\$10,160.00	Includes understory crop establishment, access path installation, invasive removal
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These values reflect the range of implementation intensity across systems and inform total project costs. Using this data, the projected cost to implement 1,000 acres of practices under this plan ranges from **\$3 million to \$10.5 million**, depending on the final mix of practice types, infrastructure needs, and landowner participation. Lower-cost systems such as hay alley cropping and silvopasture are expected to dominate in acreage, while higher-cost systems like intensive alley cropping and forest farming will be implemented more selectively on suitable sites.

Implementation

Effective implementation of the Conservation Action Plan will require a coordinated effort across multiple years, beginning with early-stage planning and outreach, and culminating in full-scale adoption and monitoring. Initial planning needs include robust landowner outreach and engagement to ensure broad awareness and voluntary participation. Simultaneously, BCCD and partners will prioritize sites based on flood risk, soil degradation, and potential for agroforestry practice success. Final design and technical planning will cover the layout of demonstration plots, community nurseries, and Integrated Pest Management (IPM) programs.

The implementation timeline is designed to be adaptive, recognizing that recruitment, planning, and implementation efforts are already underway through early agroforestry funding and engagement. Rather than following a strictly sequential model, activities will progress concurrently across sites based on readiness, opportunity, and capacity.

From 2025 onward, the plan will continue its active recruitment and outreach to landowners while expanding site planning, technical assistance, and early implementation where feasible. Pilot projects, demonstration plots, and nursery establishment will continue through 2026 and 2027, during which successful practices will inform broader rollout strategies. From 2028 through 2032, efforts will scale up across the county with a focus on continuous evaluation, adaptation, and partner coordination. Annual updates to the timeline and milestones will be shared at the Bennington County Local Working Group to ensure flexibility and responsiveness to changing conditions and lessons learned.

While the CAP is supported by existing funding programs, successful deployment will require substantial financial assistance over its eight-year lifespan. The total investment—estimated at \$3 million to \$10.5 million based on per-acre cost analysis—will be distributed across a diverse suite of agroforestry practices. Funding will be leveraged through NRCS cost-share programs, state match, philanthropic contributions, and direct investments from landowners.

Significant technical assistance and staffing resources are also required. This includes the expansion of the technical service provider pool, mobilization of a Conservation Corps

workforce, and coordination support through BCCD and NRCS. These resources will ensure consistent practice installation, workforce training, and long-term landowner support.

Project prioritization and sequencing will follow a risk-informed approach, emphasizing readiness, impact, and equity. High-priority areas include flood-prone lands, severely degraded soils, and underserved communities with demonstrated interest and need. Sequencing will also account for existing infrastructure and the presence of partner capacity to deliver support.

Coordination and management will be led by BCCD, with strong interagency collaboration and nonprofit partnerships. NRCS will serve as the lead technical agency, ensuring adherence to conservation standards and alignment with national priorities.

Outreach and marketing will be organized through a Rapid Response Outreach and Weather Preparedness initiative. Outreach strategies will include workshops, field tours, digital resources, and engagement through demonstration sites to showcase practice benefits, support farmer-to-farmer learning, and foster broad adoption.

Progress Evaluation and Monitoring

The CAP's success will be measured through both qualitative and quantitative indicators. Progress will be tracked using tools such as RUSLE2 to measure erosion control outcomes, laboratory soil tests for organic matter improvement, and water retention assessments. Market metrics—such as new vendor participation and increased producer income—will also serve as indicators of system resilience. Workforce metrics will include the number of new conservation workers trained and employed.

Annual reports summarizing progress, expenditures, and field-level outcomes will be presented at the Bennington County Local Working Group meeting, offering transparency, community accountability, and a platform for adaptive management. These reports will inform course corrections and allow for responsive adjustments to program delivery.

Project monitoring will be conducted by NRCS and BCCD field staff, with supplemental support from partnering organizations managing on-farm demonstration sites and collecting site-specific data from participating landowners. An adaptive management approach will allow findings to inform both future phases of the CAP and broader conservation programming across the region.

Bibliography

References

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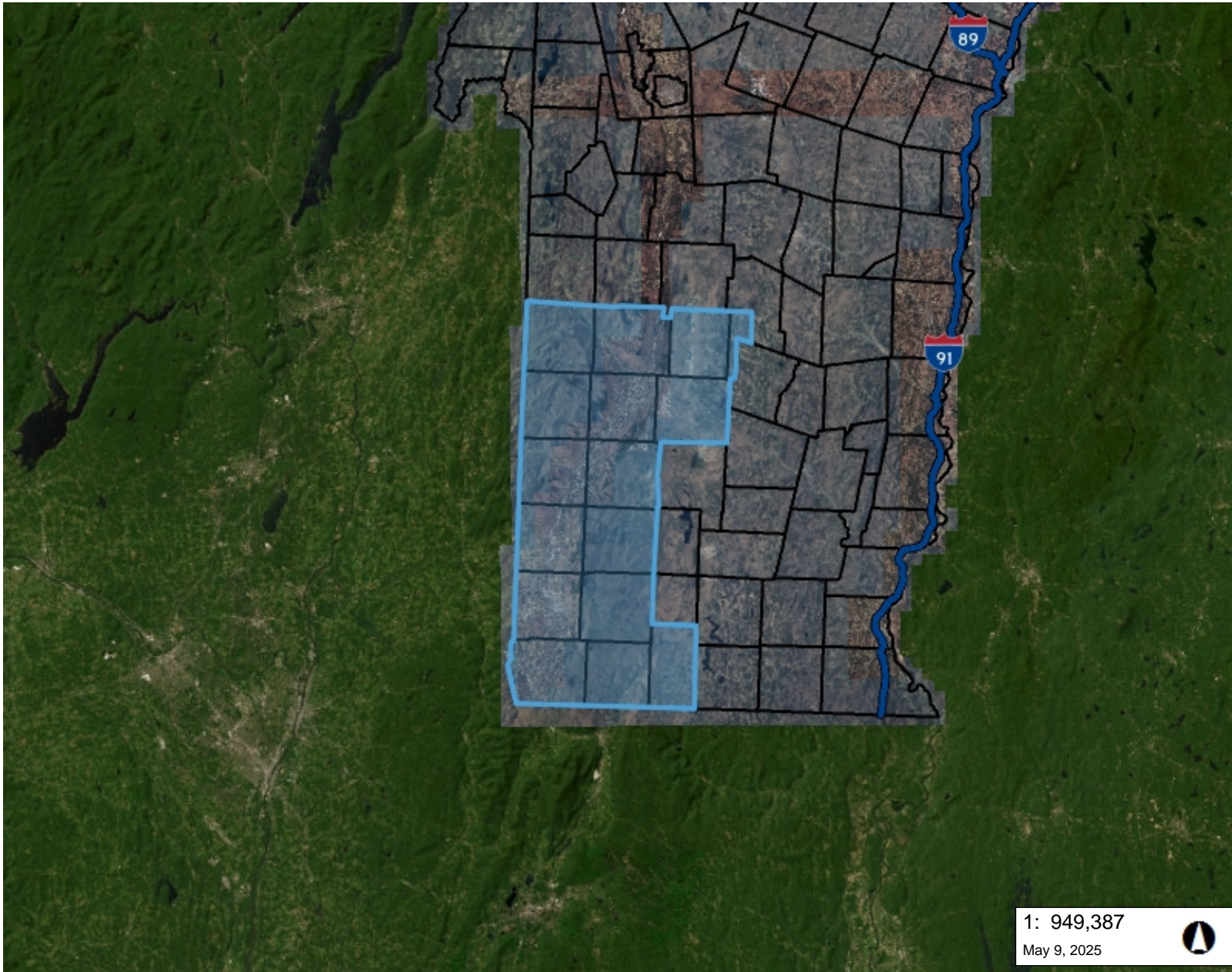
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<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ecolec.2023.100056>

USDA National Agroforestry Center. (2016). *Working Trees Info Sheet: How can agroforestry help landowners adapt to increased rain intensity?*

<https://www.fs.usda.gov/nac/assets/documents/workingtrees/infosheets/WTInfoSheet-AdaptRainIntensity.pdf>

Appendix A:
Service Area Map



LEGEND

Roads

- Interstate
- US Highway; 1
- State Highway
- Town Highway (Class 1)
- Town Highway (Class 2,3)
- Town Highway (Class 4)
- State Forest Trail
- National Forest Trail
- Legal Trail
- Private Road/Driveway
- Proposed Roads

- Town Boundary

1: 949,387

May 9, 2025



NOTES

Map created using ANR's Natural Resources Atlas

48,229.0 0 24,114.00 48,229.0 Meters

WGS_1984_Web_Mercator_Auxiliary_Sphere

1" = 79116 Ft. 1cm = 9494 Meters

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THIS MAP IS NOT TO BE USED FOR NAVIGATION

DISCLAIMER: This map is for general reference only. Data layers that appear on this map may or may not be accurate, current, or otherwise reliable. ANR and the State of Vermont make no representations of any kind, including but not limited to, the warranties of merchantability, or fitness for a particular use, nor are any such warranties to be implied with respect to the data on this map.

Appendix B:

Board Meeting Minutes Approving Local Fund Pool Request

Bennington County Conservation District Board of Supervisors Meeting

Date: April 2, 2025 9:00AM

Location: In person and zoom

Attendees: Michael Fernandez, Hannah Gianotti, Brian Vargo, Lauren Roirdan, Rob Terry, Coryn Britton, Jeannie Alexander

Agenda:

9:00 Meet and greet and review agenda, approve minutes of last meeting

9:05 Supervisor Report out

9:15 DM report

10:00 Budget proposal review

10:45 Conservation action plan and local fund pool practice approval

11:30 convene

9:12 Hannah makes motion to approve minutes, unanimous adoption

Supervisor report out

- Jeannie: Williamstown sludge treatment could affect Hoosick and everyone south, town forest plans are still being worked through
- Lauren: solar meeting on Holy Smoke Road and it's still pending with a lot up in the air
- Brian: Shaftesbury now has EAB (emerald ash borer) committee to cut down trees
- Hannah: Winhall is looking for the next route of funding for flood hazard regulations and zoning, a lot of talk of development in river corridors, we had a tour for trees for streams and we are losing 8' chunks of erosion into the river. *Coryn might need to revisit. Rain coming this week, flooding isn't immediate concern but erosion is.
- Rob: The Belmont is a proposed end-to-end serviced mountain biking trail and dissects VT North to South, will more or less follow Catamount Trail. Talked about landscape level conservation for northern taconics with Elizabeth Daut.

9:24 DM update:

- Climate corp program terminated

Switching to budget proposal review and CAP/ local fund pool practice approval because Brian has to leave 10:30

9:25 Budget proposal review

- VT senate and house committees are recommending an increase in budget from 612,000 last year. House Ag proposed 3 million, senate 1.5. Michael will continue to lobby for 3 million. We won't know until the governor signs the budget.
- Locally led is a small grant we received, most of it is spent
- Ag CWIP covers some of Coryn and Michael's TA work time, used for initial site visits. We still have 18 months on agreement, looking positive for a 4 year renewal.
- VAWQP is a regional coordination grant for regional service providers. Two meetings a year, some of Coryn's funding comes from here. Spring meeting will be sometime in May.
- NRCC we applied for a walk behind tractor and trailer, they denied most but are helping pay for a portion of the tractor.
- Suburban propane is donating \$5000 for the above mentioned tractor
- Tactical basin planning is our outreach grant for prospecting water projects. We've been promoting the edible riparian buffer project with flyering recently. It is the end of the 5 year cycle so we are working with Angie Allen and Jim Henderson to amend the agreement, discussing a LWAP for Lake Paran. Wasn't included originally so instead, we are going to do lakewise assessments with this grant and can pursue the LWAP in 2026 or 2027.
- Incubator Farm. We have 25k this year, 25k next year. 20k set aside for project coordinator; this person will have to be a veteran. Will be breaking ground in May/June, some members on site will help maintain system until we find someone to hire
- Watershed United VT is a capacity development grant. This supports the majority of Coryn's work. Mostly for training, Coryn can get Conservation Planner Level 1 and potentially pursue TSP status. 18 months to spend the grant.

Compensation

- Michael will stay on salary and not do 401k matching, taking a small cut in salary to leave room for new hires
- Tactical basin and WUV will be paying Coryn's hours at \$25/hour with \$400 health stipend
- Environmental engineer, as soon as we find someone this will become a FT position funded by NACD and NRCDs
- Project coordinator role for incubator farm project would will not be an employee of the district but for the purposes of the budget is written

Administrative

- Printing allowance increased
- Rent is a new line item
- We have back dues to NRCD

- T shirts?

10:07 Jeannie makes motion to adopt budget for 2025 Lauren seconds, everyone approved except Brian, abstention due to inactivity

EQIP list

- Of the projects we brought forward, 13 were funded for a total award volume of \$682,494.28. majority were agroforestry or closely related
- We put forward \$273,786 in CSP applications, none were awarded yet, if DC office received more requested funding, some of these will hopefully go through
- We directed vast majority of the pool

Conservation Action Plan

- We had to scrub a lot of language (environmental justice, the word “climate,” historically underserved producers)
- Back and forth with DC to change ranking questions for similar reasons/language
- We will only be doing it in Bennington County
- 5 primary practices in addition to CAP are alley cropping, silvopasture, forest farming, hedgerow planting, windbreak renovation
 - Change in approach: pick 5 practices and then choose 5 supporting practices for those
 - Refer to “Local Fund Pool Practices” google Doc

Rob asked: How much sugaring is on leased land?

Voting to adopt as preliminary list of practices to take to local working group (zoom) to then get approved, and then bring to NRCS

10:50 Hannah makes a motion to approve the CAP and proposed practices, Jeannie seconded. Unanimous in favor.

10:51 Michael Decided to send transcript for DM update

10:52 Motion to adjourn Jeannie, Lauren seconded