

**January 12th, 2026, 5:00 – 7:00 pm**

CAC Members Present: Karina, Lori, Eric, Breck, Andrew, Martine, Denise, Bob, Carol Ode, Alison

Public: Mark Naud, Alexa Lewis

Presenters: Bob Zaino, Jens Hilke

**5:00 – 5:15 pm**

**Welcome and Introductions (5 min)** – Karina Dailey, Chair

**Public Comments (5 min)** – Karina Dailey, Chair

**Chair's Update (5 min)** – Karina Dailey, Chair

**5:15 – 6:00 pm**

Presentation on Vermont Conservation Design from Bob Zaino and Jens Hilke

- Jens is a conservation planner and Bob is an ecologist at the VT Dept of Fish and Wildlife
- VT Conservation Design is a science based vision to sustain Vermont's natural resources for future generations. It is a design for the future
- It is available on the biofinder website where all the data is available for viewing
- It is a map that prioritizes ecologically important lands, waters, etc and is used as a conservation framework and guides work from the department and partners
- VCD envisions a functional landscape that ensures clean air, water, carbon sequestration, and flood protection. Focusing on all the ecological elements of Vermont
- It supports social and economic values as well such as recreation, natural beauty, rural character, economics of rural environments
- Started in 2011 with the first version, this is the most recent iteration
- Central part of the terrestrial design is a forest block, an area of natural cover surrounded by roads, development, agriculture and big surface waters
- Design prioritizes existing forest blocks based on ecological value and representation in Vermont
- Updated in 2023 and went from 30 meter pixel to half meter pixel, images are much sharper and more refined, particularly important around the edges of forest blocks which means we have increased ability to detect forest block edges which supports connectivity
- Base layer is comprised of highest priority forest blocks layer (4052 blocks total), highest priority surface water and riparian areas, and natural community and habitat features these three factors combined design an ecologically functional landscape

- Ecological function is the degree to which an ecosystem can function under natural processes allowing all its plants and animals to thrive in response to environmental change.
- An ecologically functional landscape is,
  - Intact, connected, diverse
- Conservation at three scales
  - Landscapes - big scale blocks, watersheds,
  - Natural communities - wetlands, grasslands, young and old forests
  - Species - species with very specific biological needs
- The design in total with all the components is necessary for a functional landscape but made up of specific components
  - Interior Forests - The largest forest blocks in each biophysical region. Areas of contiguous forest and other natural communities and habitats that are unfragmented. These interior forest blocks are different sizes depending on the biophysical region, some regions are more populated and have smaller interior forest blocks than others.
  - Connectivity blocks
    - Connected pattern of forests from north to south, east to west
    - Includes interior forests, as well as smaller blocks that allow for connection between blocks
  - Geological Diversity
    - A set of forest blocks that reflect the full diversity of Vermont's bedrock, soils, elevations, and landforms
  - Surface water and riparian networks
    - The complete network of rivers, lakes, ponds, streams, and their buffers
    - Vast majority is highest priority
    - Riparian Connectivity
      - Surface waters area that are currently vegetated - can become another connectivity avenue

## Community and Species Scale Components

- Natural Communities Habitats, and Species
  - All the mapped community and species scale components - RTE species, underground habitats, grasslands, road crossings, vernal pools, aquatic habitats, youth and old forests, natural communities
- Natural Communities
  - Interacting assemblage of organisms and their physical environment such as alpine meadow, red oak northern hardwood forest, river cobble shore, red maple black gum basin swamp.
  - Often associated with headwaters or river system - many communities such as shorelands, floodplain forests are very tied to water systems
  - Aquatic habitats
    - Biological diversity and physical diversity
    - Road crossings with culverts can support terrestrial wildlife as well

- Wetlands are almost all prioritized in the design
- Why conserve at multiple scales?
  - Efficiency, effectiveness
  - Working at community scale allows all species living in that community to be supported at once
- Design identifies all the features and can help bring us all together for the functional landscape
- Overlaid social vulnerability - percentage below poverty line, percentage of manufactured housing, age, unemployment, per capita income
- Act 59, 30 x 30, 50 x 50
  - VHCBC leading plan for how to make that happen, a year ago Vermont's conserved lands were mapped
  - Allows a comparison between amount of land in a natural community and percentage of that land that is conserved
  - Looked at watersheds and assessed which areas have highest priority riparian areas conserved
  - Can map where riparian areas are conserved along a watershed, more conservation in headwaters than along the main stem in many cases
  - Permanently buying land for conservation is not going to work, need a broader approach
  - Recommendations for how to use conserved lands
    - Expand Vermont conserved lands to better represent all nine biophysical regions
    - Support stewardship of riparian and aquatic areas
    - Protect corridors
    - Enhance RTE species protection
- There is so much we can do across the board, conserving ecological function supports both nature and people
- [Vermont Conservation Design | Vermont Fish & Wildlife Department](#)
- [Vermont ANR - BioFinder4](#)
- Andrew - Thank you so much. Shout out to Wetland, Woodland, Wildland book. Highest priority riparian areas analysis - is there something there the CAC can work on? Very interested in strategic investments in different types of riparian areas to protect function, human use and safety
  - Jens - Riparian area was updated in 2023 and made the riparian data much more detailed to identify small scale riparian areas, hoped that FFI would be ready to intersect the two tools but that hasn't happened yet. Interested in gathering a group to assess the aquatic parts of the design in the next update.
- Breck - Really impressive work. I'm sure there will be modifications with new data and layers, what is next? Further refinement? Implementation and use? And what is needed for that next step
  - Jens - implementation is first and foremost. Working with municipalities on land use planning, state lands acquisition, using it for the land management team to use it, many partners are using it as well. Getting the word out and how many

interests fit into the design is very important. Always working to update it with recent data. Always have to balance reactivity and long term focus on goals. Some data is old and could be updated.

- Bob - echoes what I was thinking, finding ways to implement what has been designed is the main focus, especially finding ways to build connections with other work that is being done. We haven't identified anything new, but we are putting it into a larger context and pulling it all together. We had a lot of good discussion around the update on the ways that water and riparian areas are prioritized. So much of the riparian areas are the highest priorities and we discussed if that is too inclusive to be a highest priority rating, an interesting tension because we do need everything, but some might be more important in one way or another.
- Bob F - all about land use which affects river, lakes. Letting the river flow naturally is very important work.
- Breck - prioritization framework for riparian areas - Wondering if prioritization is really the intended focus, or does the tool give people a lot of very important information. Less about prioritizing and more about sharing information for each user to use to guide their own decisions.
  - Jens, the use of land is very diverse, sometimes being specific or more general is necessary for a given project, so the design has to balance those perspectives.
  - Agree with Breck and maybe our role is define the questions we want answered for Lake Champlain tributaries
- Karina - struck by how far we've come with the pixel definition. Curious if further refinement is useful/necessary, are we groundtruthing now?
  - More data is good except when it's not. If the data is too specific then you lose the forest for the trees. Computer algorithms struggle to identify some of the nuances in forests. Sometimes more refinement makes it overly complex and hard to display, but the surface water dataset probably could be updated.
- Lori - Thank you, very impressive. What funding are you pursuing, why non-federal? Is that because of lack of federal support?
  - There is no immediate funding plan, we know we want to update the aquatic layers and that is the next step. Signaling to this group that they will be working towards finding funding, federal funding can be very complex, especially right now.
- Bob F- any comments on waters of the State or WOTUS, how you define a wetland, perennial vs ephemeral federally
  - Not familiar with that, but we are trying to map these features ecologically not based on regulations
    - Karina - Thinking about Vermont wetlands and the push to define wetlands based on maps, in this case the map is a planning tool vs regulatory tool. If we transition to maps as regulations where does that really take us
      - When we use the UVM land cover data there is a base set and then there is the supplemental wetlands and agricultural data

overlap, but they overlap so some maps map them as ag and some as wet, algorithms are trying to figure out the signature of a particular pixel, so the maps aren't as set in stone as they might be.

### **6:00 – 6:30**

Preparation for Mark Sandborn, EPA Regional Administrator Region 1, coming in February to discuss MOA with LCBP NEWPCC

- Dec 16 steering committee meeting Mark Sandborn came and asked to join a CAC meeting in advance of the April steering committee meeting, so we are having him in February. We should discuss the MOA and what we want to cover with Mark, what's the plan?
  - Productive steering committee meeting in Dec.
  - Karina motioned to enter into an executive session to discuss the MOA, Lori made some great opening comments.
  - Everyone was engaged and responsible, and got some context from ANR, NEWPCC.
  - Karina made another motion to have the steering committee advise the strategic advisory committee, all the comments on the MOU would be made public, LCBP and NEWPCC staff could comment on the draft anonymously.
  - Karina has not received the notes yet, but Edo has shared the comments that were made on the draft.
  - No plan has been shared for how staff of LCBP or NEWPCC will anonymously comment. Karina followed up with Edo on that request from the motion. Hoping to hear back from the SAC on the plan for that.
  - Mark put a lot of time into drafting an MOU, CAC could also draft an MOU to further reinforce our points.
    - Mark - Looked into governing documents and statutes for LCBP and CAC. Used the enabling documents to draft a new MOU to draw attention to the existing language, we could add to that, or not because it may open a can of worms.
    - Mark - In the next two years leading up to a new OFA could consider a new fiscal agent, or the roles, and responsibilities of the fiscal agent at that point.
    - Mark - tried to keep it simple. Also added in the significance of public participation, there is a lot of emphasis in legislation on that.
      - Breck - I have some specific comments on the MOU, let's strategize tonight on how we use those materials. I think the strategic committee is open to the MOU being changed, in the short term we can identify the relationship between the steering committee and the NEWPCC which is a crucial part. I'd like to see the MOU narrowly focused on sensitive issues like employee management, project failure, or other highly sensitive matters.

Wait to send the memo, send a draft MOU, wait to see how they are received until sending the longer memo. Idk how much Mark Sandborn knows about the details, he's very busy and new to the region. Could lightly change the memo to Mark and to explain some of the background

- Scheduling another meeting to get into the memo and MOU draft
- Need to get materials 60 Days before the meeting, earlier the better to gauge reactions.
- Meet this Friday afternoon at 1:30
- Also meeting Jan 22 at 12:30
- Ahren said that they were introducing legislation to remove NEWPCC as the fiscal agent, Mark asked for a note
  - Fiscal year 26 bill report directing the EPA to do an evaluation, other language is being drafted but hasn't been introduced once congress reengaged.
  - This is the language in the Bill report Ahren shared ..."Additionally, the Committee directs the Agency to evaluate the performance of NEIWPCC in its role of administering the funds provided for the Lake Champlain Basin program, including timeliness in awarding and completing projects and cost effectiveness, and provide a report to the Committee not later than 180 days following the enactment of this Act on the Agency's findings."
- How to engage more with the other CACs, Loi reached out to them and it's unclear whether the NY CAC chair brought it up at their Dec meeting, but he supported where the VT CAC was coming from, Lori encouraged him to make a public statement. QC CAC never heard back from them. Would be helpful to be vocally on the same page.
  - Could try to recruit them to a future planning meeting, like on the 22 - Karina will reach out to do that.
  - If members of CACs are going to participate we will need to bring them up to speed
- Going to talk more on Friday on what to say to Mark Sandborn
  - Breck - Helpful to slightly rework the memo and send him that, but not the draft MOU yet, but state the high level what we want to see in that MOU and why, then have a discussion with him about that
  - That can be part of the Friday agenda
- We also need to debrief the annual public launch
  - Well attended, all went well. The panel was great. We got media coverage on WCAX. The panel was good, space was good. I think it was the best attended yet. Getting the word out there and more exposure for the CAC. Having a good headliner is key. At retreat in the summer we should start thinking about the headliner and space for the launch event.

#### **6:30 – 6:45**

Scheduling 2026– legislative and executive meetings

Committees - Natural Resources, Ag committees, Governor, Lt Gov. Reach out to money committees, Transportation for chloride, maybe we should be tailoring our message to the committees. Avoid appropriations this year? Carol - goes to house ways and means and finance. Will need to be really clear with the message and sometimes we don't have all the answers to the questions. Good for ways and means committee to hear about the importance of clean water funding.

Avoid February break week - last week in February, Denise is in the Statehouse Wednesday already, Thursday and Friday also good. Last week in January Bob is at the GMWEA conference, January 31-7 Andrew is out. Breck is out 1-17 of March. Making it in person is harder than virtually.

#### **6:45 – 7:00**

Participation and Membership Recruitment - Eric, Lori, Andrew, Karina, Wayne next meeting will be their last meeting unless they are renewing their terms.

Who wants to renew their CAC membership?

- Karina
- Andrew
- Lori

#### Resigning

- Wayne is not going to renew, but can serve until replaced - Bob can reach out to people to replace Wayne in the engineering field - Miles Wait could be a possibility, Evan Fitzgerald, Jordan Duffy - so busy.
- Eric is not going to renew, but can serve until replaced. Trying to find someone in the ag community to replace him, would like the committee to help with that. Still working on who that might be. Denise going to reach out to some farmer contacts, could be Kent, John Roberts - he used to be a part of the committee.
- Send November notes with Jan notes to Feb meeting

Board Member Name	Term Expires
Eric Clifford	2/28/2026
William Brek Bowden	2/28/2027
Robert Fischer	2/28/2027
Lori Fisher	2/28/2026
Andrew Milliken	2/28/2026
Hilary Soloman	2/28/2027
Karina Dailey	2/28/2026
Alison Spasyk	2/28/2027
Denise Smith	2/29/2027
Wayne Elliot	2/28/2026