

Vermont Housing and Conservation Board
POLICY POSITION
FUNDING FOR NATURAL AREA PROJECTS

By establishing the protection of important wildlife habitat and important natural areas as one of the goals of the Vermont Housing and Conservation Board, the Vermont legislature acknowledged the importance of preserving Vermont's biological diversity and natural heritage. In an effort to meet the Vermont Housing and Conservation Board goal of protecting important natural areas, the Board adopts the following policy:

It is the policy of the Board that Trust Fund dollars should go to preserve such special areas as:

- A. **Land which supports vital ecological or conservation functions and values**, such as:
- a) significant wildlife habitat
 - b) lands of importance to fish and wildlife because of their limited occurrence or biological diversity or productivity
 - c) lands essential to maintaining wildlife corridors or nesting habitats
 - d) lands representative of ecosystem types in Vermont, essential to the preservation of the range of Vermont's biological diversity and natural heritage
- B. **Lands supporting rare, threatened or endangered natural communities, plants or wildlife**, such as:
- a) habitats which are rare due to range limitations
 - b) habitat of special importance to endangered or threatened species
 - c) habitats or natural communities which are not already well-represented in protected areas
- C. **Lands having physiographic or geological features of statewide significance**, such as:
- a) waterfalls
 - b) caves
 - c) gorges
 - d) river deltas

The Board is willing to fund preservation projects which include direct nonprofit, state or municipal ownership or purchase of conservation easements, as long as the result is the perpetual conservation and/or protection of natural areas. As is the case with all VHCB supported projects, there must be nonprofit, municipal or state agency involvement in the land conservation projects and the applicant for funds must be a nonprofit organization, municipality or state agency.

Cost will be a limiting factor in the purchase of natural areas or rights therein. Funding priority will be given based on overall evaluation by VHCB staff, including how well the project meets the criteria of the policy considerations for evaluating natural areas projects and if the site is identified in the Nongame and Natural Heritage Inventory or the site is listed on the Fragile Areas Registry. The Board will review local and regional plans to see how well the project coincides with the plans. Projects which also meet other goals of the VHCB will receive high priority.

POLICY CONSIDERATIONS FOR EVALUATING NATURAL AREA PROJECTS

In addition to the standard guidelines for quality, need, and impact, the following guidelines will be used in evaluating natural area projects:

Accessibility to the land or water

Unless public access to the area will jeopardize the natural community or will threaten any species of the community, some form of public access should be assured.

Leverage

The Vermont Housing and Conservation Board expects applicants to request less than the total cost of funding a particular project. Applicants can leverage funds by landowner donation, private donations or with other public funds used as matching money.

Natural Communities

The Vermont Housing and Conservation Board places a priority on projects which will protect a highly significant occurrence of a natural community type not already protected in that part of the state.

The Board places greater emphasis on projects which will protect the only known or best occurrence of a natural community statewide.

Importance to protected lands

In evaluating natural area projects, the Board places a priority on projects which will protect land that abuts or is otherwise integral to or connects permanently protected land and is related significantly to the protected property. The Board also places a priority on projects which are the beginning of a planned assemblage held by a public agency or held by a private non-profit conservation organization eligible for Vermont Housing and Conservation Trust funds. An overall plan for a beginning preserve must exist and be reviewed by the VHCB staff.

Wildlife Habitat

The Vermont Housing and Conservation Board places a priority on projects which will:

- protect significant wildlife habitat
- protect a significant wildlife travel corridor for the movement of wildlife populations between large habitat areas
- protect State rare, threatened, or endangered species or associated habitat and the protected property will secure enough land to sustain a population of the species during at least part of its life cycle
- protect globally rare, threatened, or endangered species or associated habitat and the protected property will secure enough land to sustain a population of the species during at least part of its life cycle

The Board will consider the area's biological diversity in evaluating the project, and will place greater emphasis on protecting areas which have greater diversity, or which protect more than one rare, threatened, or endangered species or habitat.

Support

The applicant should provide documentation of support for the project from municipalities, neighboring landowners, regional planning commission, or other related groups.

Perpetual Protection

A stewardship plan which meets the approval of VHCB staff shall be created for the property.

Definitions:

"wildlife" is defined as any member of native species of the animal or plant kingdom, including without limitation any plant, mammal, fish, bird, reptile, mollusk, crustacean, arthropod or other invertebrate

"rare" means rare as defined by the Nongame and Natural Heritage program and as supported by their data

"threatened" means a species listed on the state threatened species list (10 V.S.A. §5402) or is determined to be a "threatened species" under the federal Endangered Species Act, or the habitat in which this species can be found

"endangered" means a species listed on the state endangered species list (10 V.S.A. §5402) or determined to be an "endangered species" under the federal Endangered Species Act, or the habitat in which this species can be found. The term generally refers to species whose continued existence as a viable component of the state's flora or fauna is in jeopardy.

"significant wildlife habitat" is identifiable habitat which is decisive to the survival of a significant number of a species of wildlife at any period of its life.

"natural community" means an area which has certain physical characteristics that unify it and make it different from other areas, and has a community of plants and animals that are characteristic of that kind of habitat (VT Nongame and Natural Heritage Program definition)