

# Vermont Conservation Strategy Initiative

## Frequently Asked Questions

Stakeholders across Vermont celebrated the passage of the Community Resilience and Biodiversity Protection Act in June of 2023. This legislation puts Vermont on course to protect the ecological functions of our landscapes with the ambitious goals of conserving 30% of Vermont's landscape by 2030 and 50% by 2050. The Vermont Legislature has directed the Vermont Agency of Natural Resources and the Vermont Housing and Conservation Board to collect public input as they inventory the current state of conservation in Vermont and develop a long-term plan to reach these ambitious goals. Here are some of our Frequently Asked Questions:

1. What sort of conservation practices, funding mechanisms, land types, ownership mechanisms, and strategies will be used to reach these goals?
2. How is conserved land defined? What counts as conserved land?
3. Who are the stakeholders? How are they identified?
4. What is the timeline and what are the milestones for the Phase I - Conservation Inventory?
5. When are the interviews and how can I participate?
6. What are the focus groups and how can I participate?
7. What are the working groups, and can I participate?
8. Who is leading this effort?
9. Why Nature for Justice?
10. How do I stay updated?
11. How does this initiative include an environmental justice approach?
12. How does conserved land overlap with the Current Use program?
13. Is there a summary of Act 59?
14. Are there any common misconceptions about this Act or Initiative?
15. Does the conserved land include water?
16. How will the capacity of non-profits and other holders of conservation interests be addressed?

### **1. What sort of conservation practices, funding mechanisms, land types, ownership mechanisms, and strategies will be used to reach these goals?**

The initial phase of this initiative is an inventory. The inventory is a survey of current conservation and opportunities for conservation. Therefore, this phase does not provide final or definitive specific strategies or practices to be used. Once the inventory is complete, in July 2024, this information will be used to draft a conservation strategy by the end of 2025.

### **2. How is conserved land defined? What counts as conserved land?**

This is one of the questions we are currently asking as well! The answer will be determined based on past work as well as engagement with stakeholders through working-groups, interviews, and focus groups. Act 59 outlines three distinct types of conserved lands which will be further defined by the VCSI. These categories are: (1) “Ecological reserve area” means an area having permanent protection from conversion and that is managed to maintain a natural state within which natural ecological processes and disturbance events are allowed to proceed with minimal interference. (2) “Biodiversity conservation area” means an area having permanent protection from conversion for the majority of the area and that is managed for the primary goal of sustaining species or habitats. These areas may include regular, active interventions to address the needs of particular species or to maintain or restore habitats. (3) “Natural resource management area” means an area having permanent protection from conversion for the majority of the area but that is subject to long-term, sustainable land management. The Act also asked us to outline what type of agricultural land should count towards conserved land.

### **3. Who are the stakeholders? How are they identified?**

Stakeholders include a broad list of communities who support and benefit from conservation. These stakeholder categories were defined in Act 59. Specific individuals for working groups, interviews, and focus groups are identified by Nature for Justice, recommended by others, self-nominated, or recommended by VHCB and ANR.

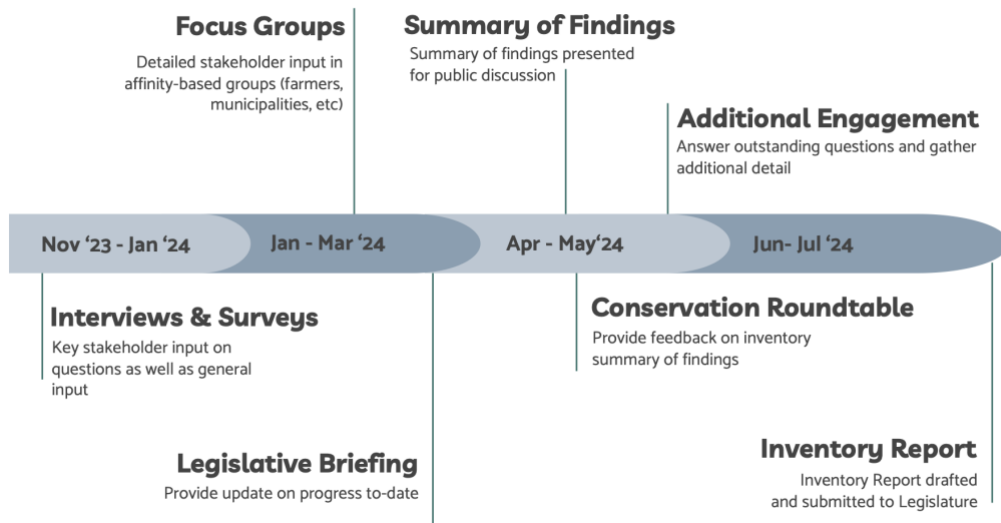
Stakeholders include:

- Public and private land managers
- Land trusts, and funders
- Indigenous groups and representatives from historically marginalized and disadvantaged communities

- Conservation policy and environmental justice advocates
- Farm, forest and recreation landowners
- Representatives from working lands enterprises
- Outdoor recreation organizations and grassroots initiatives
- Municipalities, regional planning commissions, conservation commissions and conservation districts
- Any other groups who support and benefit from conservation investments

Our goal is to ensure that anyone who wants to participate in the public roundtable and a focus group is able to do so!

#### 4. What is the timeline and what are the milestones for the Phase I - Conservation Inventory?



#### 5. When are the interviews and how can I participate?

Interviews are intended for people who represent stakeholder groups and can help us gather additional stakeholders in focus groups OR for representatives of stakeholder groups who have specific knowledge or a future role in land acquisition or stewardship. We are hosting interviews now through January. If you would like to participate in an interview please fill out this interest form: <https://forms.gle/q1QtQVoxfDRFMpnX6>. These interviews are confidential but we will share a summary of takeaways of the interview in focus groups as well as in written-form in the Spring.

## 6. What are the focus groups and how can I participate?

Focus groups are where groups of similar people gather to share their perspectives. We plan to have focus groups with approximately 25 different groups, including recreation specialists, private landowners, indigenous communities, and many more. We are hosting focus groups in late January - March. If you'd like to suggest a focus group or participate in one, please fill out this interest form

<https://forms.gle/g1QtQVoxfDRFMpnX6> or continue to check our website January 2024-March 2024 to review opportunities and self-select into a focus group. Our goal is that everyone who wants to participate in a focus group will be able to do so. We will release summaries of these conversations next Spring.

## 7. What are the working groups, and can I participate?

Working groups are established to respond to specific technical questions asked in Act 59. Four working groups are established: Aquatic, Agriculture, State Lands, and Conservation Categories. Working groups are made up of conservation stakeholders able to commit considerable time and energy into these topics. Each working group will also hold a roundtable (a type of focus group) to share their recommendations in March. If you are interested in sitting in on a working group or want to participate in the roundtable of one of the working groups, please reach out to [vermont.conservation@gmail.com](mailto:vermont.conservation@gmail.com)

## 8. Who is leading this effort?

The Vermont Housing and Conservation Board (VHCB) is tasked with leading this effort, in consultation with the Agency of Natural Resources. VHCB has contracted Nature for Justice (N4J) to conduct stakeholder engagement and data analysis. The first phase of this project has also been supported by staff from various statewide conservation organizations including The Vermont Land Trust (VLT), Vermont Audubon Society, The Nature Conservancy (TNC), the Trust for Public Land (TPL), and various state agencies.

## 9. Why Nature for Justice?

Nature for Justice (N4J) is a non-profit organization that works at the nexus of social and climate justice. N4J is made up of staff and consultants with experience spanning 70+ countries and diverse backgrounds in conservation, natural resources management, finance, economic development, and social justice and inclusion. VHCB selected N4J to lead this work due to their team's mix of global perspective on conservation planning,

their deep connections to Vermont, and their experience and commitment to facilitating a robust and inclusive community engagement process that will ensure Vermonters' voices are heard. To learn more about Nature for Justice, [click here to visit the N4J website](#).

## **10. How do I stay updated?**

The best way to stay connected is to bookmark the [VCSI webpage](#), and check back in every once in a while for updates. You can also fill out this survey with an option to enter your email for future updates: <https://forms.gle/jtDxU3QgUgUAMK1d6>

## **11. How does this initiative include an environmental justice approach?**

While VHCB is leading the initiative, with support from ANR, they have hired a third-party, equity-based organization to serve as a neutral party in stakeholder engagement and public participation. Explicit efforts are being made to engage marginalized stakeholder communities and ensure that everyone who wants to participate is given a seat at the table and funding is available to assist in accessibility of participation.

## **12. How does conserved land overlap with the Current Use program?**

Many currently conserved parcels in Vermont, both forest land and agricultural lands, are enrolled in Vermont's Use Value Appraisal program (and we anticipate being able to provide a more definitive analysis of the numbers of acres conserved and enrolled with or as a result of the Act 59 Inventory).

As currently established and administered, the Current Use program provides different benefits and has distinct requirements for participants when compared to the definition of "conserved" in Act 59.

## **13. Is there a summary of Act 59?**

You can find a shareable summary of Act 59, developed by N4J here:

[https://drive.google.com/file/d/1CB1YILe59LfESW4TwmnyaitZapWpMZzm/view?usp=share\\_link](https://drive.google.com/file/d/1CB1YILe59LfESW4TwmnyaitZapWpMZzm/view?usp=share_link)

## **14. Are there any common misconceptions about this Act or Initiative?**

We are often asked how we are currently developing the conservation plan. However, we are currently engaged in an inventory phase where we are gathering input and information from stakeholders about the current status of conservation in the state as well as the options for what we do in the future. Actual planning, which means choosing

the options that will move us from the agreed-on baseline will begin July 2024 and go through 2025 with implementation formally starting (although already ongoing) in 2026.

### **15. Does the conserved land include water?**

Act 59 mandates that we pursue conservation of land. However, the act also includes specific questions and goals for ensuring that land-based conservation strategies consider aquatic system health and provide recommendations to further enhance that health consistent with Vermont Conservation Design. The Aquatic Working group, as well as the interviews, focus groups, and roundtable will inform how we recommend including water in the plan.

### **16. How will the capacity of non-profits and other holders of conservation interests be addressed?**

As a part of the conservation inventory, we are assessing existing funding and capacity of organizations involved in conservation and having conversations that explore potential avenues for increasing organizational funding and capacity. However, no specific actions will be defined during this inventory phase