

VERMONT DEPARTMENT OF ENVIRONMENTAL CONSERVATION
WATERSHED MANAGEMENT DIVISION

VERMONT WETLANDS PROGRAM PLAN 2017-2021



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The Vermont Wetland Program Plan (“the Plan”) provides the Vermont Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC) and its partners a framework and direction over the next five years to strengthen and improve the state’s Wetland Program to better protect wetlands and aquatic resources statewide. The Plan should be considered a work in progress that will be revisited and revised as needed. The previous Plan was for a six-year period from 2011-2016. This Plan is for a future timeframe, but does include some ongoing initiatives from the last plan. Updates include the Class I designation work initiated in 2013 to provide greater protection (including increased buffer size) to unique and irreplaceable wetlands of high ecological value; proposed revisions to the Vermont Wetland Rules and statute; and improvements to our restoration goals.

The Vermont Wetlands Program (“the Program”) is a part of the Watershed Management Division of the Department of Environmental Conservation of the Agency of Natural Resources. The Watershed Management Division (“the Division”) is responsible for **protecting, maintaining, enhancing** and **restoring** the quality of Vermont's surface water resources, including the 300,000 acres of wetlands in Vermont. Keeping with the Division’s responsibility, the mission of the Wetlands Program is to identify, monitor, and protect wetlands that provide significant functions and values; to encourage the restoration and enhancement of impaired wetlands; and to teach the citizens of Vermont about wetland issues and the importance of wetland stewardship. The main objective of this plan is to build and refine the core elements of the Vermont Wetlands Program to achieve the Program’s mission. In 2012, Vermont Legislature passed Act 138, which transferred wetland rulemaking authority from the Natural Resources Board’s Water Resources Panel to the Agency of Natural Resources’ Department of Environmental Conservation. Now the Program has the responsibility to administer the Vermont Wetland Rules (“the Rules”) and receive petitions or internally initiate adoption, amendments, and repeal of the Rules. With this new responsibility, the Wetlands Program is currently **undergoing changes to the Rules** for 2017 and has initiated a stakeholder process for the winter of 2016/2017 to make substantial changes to the Rules in the coming few years. The cycling of revisions to the Vermont Wetland Rules is included in this new plan, and includes the education and outreach which is needed to aid the public in transitioning to updated rules.

After completing the first two **National Wetland Condition Assessment** (2011 and 2016), the Program has refined and strengthened its **wetland monitoring and assessment protocols**. The state is also working to better integrate wetlands with other water and lands

programs and to use the wetland monitoring and assessment data gathered thus far. Related efforts include revisions to the Surface Water Management Strategy, input into the Wildlife Action Plan, and improving coordination with the Natural Heritage Inventory.

Along with the responsibility to propose changes to the Vermont Wetland Rules, DEC now has a similar authority with the **VT Water Quality Standards** and is revising the **Anti-Degradation Policy**. The federal Farm Bill and the new Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP) grant provides Vermont with the continued opportunity to work with partners to increase the number of restored wetlands. Wetland restoration and protection is a part of the Lake Champlain TMDL clean-up plan, and proposed projects will be highlighted in Basin Plans for Ecosystem Restoration funding. The Wetlands Program is taking the lead in coordinating **wetland restoration and conservation** efforts.

WETLANDS PROGRAM MISSION AND GOALS

Working within the Mission of the Agency of Natural Resources and the Department of Conservation, and under the Agency's guiding principles and comprehensive goals, the Mission of the Wetlands Program within the Water Quality Division is:

“To identify, inventory, monitor, and protect wetlands that provide significant functions and values; to encourage the restoration and enhancement of degraded wetlands; and to provide the citizens of Vermont with information and assistance to allow them to be fully informed of wetland issues and to practice sound wetland stewardship.”

The Goals are:

- To manage the program effectively and efficiently to protect Vermont's significant wetlands;
- To achieve no net loss of wetland functions and values;
- To identify and map wetlands;
- To monitor and assess wetlands at the watershed scale, the landscape scale, and individually (Level 1, 2, and 3); and to use the resulting data to inform regulatory decisions and guide restoration projects;
- To provide a sustained level of outreach and education to the public, targeted consultants, and other governmental agencies, regarding the values and functions of wetlands and the programs designed to manage and protect them;
- To promote sound wetland stewardship on both public and private lands;

- To uphold the Vermont Wetland Rules through project review, permitting decisions and compliance; and
- To make changes to the Vermont Wetland Rules aligned with Program goals.

The Wetlands Program achieves its goals by working within the framework of the Vermont Wetlands Rules and with partner agencies, including: the Vermont Departments of Fish and Wildlife, Environmental Conservation, and Forests, Parks and Recreation; the Natural Resources Board and the Act 250 Land Use Permit program; the US Environmental Protection Agency; the US Army Corps of Engineers, the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), US Fish and Wildlife, and the Green Mountain National Forest.

CORE ELEMENTS OF THE VERMONT WETLANDS PROGRAM PLAN

The four core elements of a wetland program that have been identified by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency as part of their Enhancing State and Tribal Wetlands Program (ESTP) Initiative, have been used to organize this plan. The tables that follow list goals, objectives and activities under each element and reflect the work needed in the coming years to meet the goals. Detailed annual work plans will be developed to reflect available staffing resources from year to year.

The four core elements are:

1. Monitoring and Assessment
2. Regulatory
3. Voluntary Restoration and Protection
4. Water Quality Standards for Wetlands

CORE ELEMENT #1: MONITORING AND ASSESSMENT

Goals: *To identify and map wetlands; To monitor and assess wetlands at the watershed scale, the landscape scale, and individually (Level 1, 2, and 3); and to use the resulting data to inform regulatory decisions and guide restoration projects;*

Objective: Monitor and assess wetlands at the watershed, landscape, and site level scales consistent with EPA's 3 – Level Approach (see Elements of a State Water Monitoring and Assessment Program for Wetlands, April 2001)

Action (a): Field Monitoring and Assessing of Vermont Wetlands					
Activity	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
Participate in the National Wetlands Condition Assessment (NWCA); field sampling of 7-9 sites					X
Establish criteria for selecting long-term monitoring sites.	X	X			
Establish Regional sentinel sites; monitor and assess		X	X	X	X
Rotational Basin Wetlands Assessment; select and assess at minimum 10 wetlands per year as part of basin assessment	X	X	X	X	X
Refine VT Rapid Assessment Method (VRAM)	X				
Revise approved (2014) Quality Assurance Project Plan as needed.	X	X	X	X	X
Solar Panel Project Data collection/Analysis	X	X			
Create citizen-scientist VRAM manual and outreach materials	X				
Conduct restoration site monitoring		X	X	X	X

Action (b) Integrate the Wetlands Monitoring & Assessment Efforts with other Agency Efforts					
Activity	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
Revise Vermont's Water Quality Monitoring Strategy to include updated information on the wetland monitoring and assessment activities	X		X		X
Collaborative site selection with other water quality monitoring programs	X	X	X	X	X
Create or revise sampling design and methods	X				
Add wetland monitoring data to the Watershed Management database and data portal	X	X	X	X	X
Collaborate with VT Fish and Wildlife's Natural Heritage Inventory for data collection efficiencies and to reach common goals	X	X	X	X	X

Action (c): Improve wetland mapping for Vermont					
Activity	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
Enhance standards and methodology for adding to and altering wetland maps		X	X		
Develop a means for outside entities to electronically submit wetland delineation information to improve State wetland maps.		X	X	X	X
Develop a statewide mapping improvement plan which utilizes consultant data and advances in remote sensing		X	X	X	X
Update State wetland maps	X	X	X	X	X

CORE ELEMENT #2: REGULATORY

Goal: *To manage the program effectively and efficiently to protect Vermont’s significant wetlands and to achieve no net loss of wetland functions and values*

Objective: *Make necessary changes in the Wetlands Program to reflect Vermont Wetland Rules updates and revise the Rules to improve clarity, efficiency, and protection. Protect significant wetlands with no net loss of acreage or function.*

Action (a) Adopt regulations or rules to implement statutes					
Activity	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
Revise and create new General Permits (including non-reporting and/or registration only)	X				X
Continue refinement of Functions and Values Checklist	X	X	X	X	X
Revise Wetland Rules to include new Class I wetlands as Petitions are made available.	X	X	X	X	X
Revise Wetland Rules for improved clarity, efficiency and protection		X	X		
Develop a system to ensure regular compliance monitoring of permit conditions and mitigation projects.	X	X			
Suggest Statute revisions for wetland management improvements	X	X	X		
Review the need for jurisdictional mapping with stakeholders and update maps, Rules, and Statute as needed	X	X	X		
Continue to improve permitting database for internal tracking and public communication	X	X	X	X	X

Action (b): Perform public education and outreach about wetland protection and regulations					
Activity	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
Create policy for water quality restoration projects and potential encroachment in wetlands	X	X			
Create new guidance documents and update existing guidance documents	X		X	X	
Hold workshops for consultants and the regulated community	X	X	X	X	X
Hold a series of regional workshops for interested municipalities, organizations and citizens describing the new Rules, as needed		X	X	X	
Identify and map wetland locations	X	X	X	X	X
Improve website	X	X	X	X	X
Provide clear ongoing guidance to public on how to identify jurisdictional wetlands.	X	X	X	X	X
Create plan to train various user groups on a 5-year rotation	X	X			

Action (c): Work cooperatively with federal partners for a unified regulatory approach					
Activity	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
In-lieu fee Interagency Review team participation for project approval and site selection	X	X	X	X	X
Evaluate effectiveness of In-Lieu fee program			X	X	X
Participate in the VT General Permit renewal discussion, advocating for changes that reflect State policy	X				X
Evaluate opportunities to align Policies, permitting and documents between ACOE and the Program for more cohesive protection goals	X	X	X		X

CORE ELEMENT #3: VOLUNTARY RESTORATION AND PROTECTION

Goal: *Increase wetland acreage through restoration and promote sound wetland stewardship on both public and private lands*

Objective: *Establish consistent and compatible goals across relevant agencies and establish partnerships to leverage additional restoration and protection*

Action (a): Interagency Coordination					
Activity	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
Continue to meet with restoration partners	X	X	X	X	X
Project identification: <i>working with rivers program and watershed planners, and federal partners, identify opportunities for voluntary restoration</i>	X	X	X	X	X
Implement the Natural Resource Conservation Service's (NRCS) Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP) Wetland Reserve Easement (WRE) supplemental funding and support agreement	X	X	X		
Seek new RCPP, or RCPP-like funding		X	X	X	X

Action (b): Outreach and technical assistance for restoration projects					
Activity	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
Wetland program staff provide outreach and technical assistance for restoration	X	X	X	X	X
Create wetland easement language for the State and partners	X				

Action (c): Monitoring for success of voluntary restoration					
Activity	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
Develop indicators of success checklist		X			
Use monitoring and assessment protocol and indicators, visit selected sites			X	X	X

CORE ELEMENT #4: WATER QUALITY STANDARDS FOR WETLANDS

Goal: *Understand and address the relationship between wetlands and the Vermont Water Quality Standards*

Objective: *Ensure that wetlands are treated as waters within state water quality programs.*

Action (a): Establish the relationship between wetlands and the Vermont Water Quality Standards					
Activity	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
Review existing information to help establish the relationship between wetlands and 1) water quality standards, 2) “waters of the state” and, 3) anti-degradation policies	X	X	X	X	X
Provide a framework for addressing wetlands in any new anti-degradation policy	X	X	X	X	X
Develop wetland language for the VT Water Quality Standards				X	X