

# Forest Fragmentation

## ACTION PLAN



Photo: A. Blake Gardner

### Why Vermont Needs a Forest Fragmentation Action Plan

While close to 80% of the state is forested, for the first time in over a century, forests are declining in Vermont. Development is responsible for this trend and forests are increasingly becoming fragmented across Vermont.

Fragmentation doesn't happen all at once – in fact, it's incremental, which is why it's so hard to notice on a day-to-day basis. It usually starts with subdivision, the division of a parcel into two or more smaller lots. The result is typically an increase in parcel owners, which leads to new housing and

infrastructure development (roads, septic, utility lines, etc.). When this development occurs, it "fragments" the landscape and diminishes the economic and ecological viability of forests.

Subdivision activity in Vermont does not look like that commonly seen in other parts of the country and usually portrayed by the media. Indeed, the term "subdivision" usually conjures up images of suburban neighborhoods with identical houses situated side-by-side. Because of the discrepancy between how the public collectively imagines subdivision and the reality, Vermonters are susceptible to thinking that subdivision is not a problem.

But subdivision and other types of land development are cumulatively impacting the viability of Vermont's forests. This is why we need a coordinated land use plan to reduce forest fragmentation, and it needs to occur at the local, regional, and state levels.

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### Planning Process



This plan was developed by the Vermont Natural Resources Council (VNRC) with input from many partners including local planning and conservation commissions, selectboards, regional planning commissions, the VT Dept. of Forests, Parks and Recreation, the VT Fish and Wildlife Dept., the VT Dept. of Housing and Community Development, the VT Planners Association, and UVM Extension.

More than 36 individuals participated in a statewide workshop in Randolph, and more than 63 individuals participated in three regional workshops that took place in Craftsbury, Brandon, and Westminster. VNRC gathered feedback on different conservation strategies from the participants through discussion, ranking exercises, voting, and comment cards.



Photo: Wayne Fawbush

## Drivers of Forest Fragmentation

Subdivision and the resulting land development are a leading cause of forest fragmentation in Vermont. Other drivers of subdivision include: escalating property values and land prices, high property taxes, population growth, and housing market demand for second homes. Additionally, demographics play role. Since the average age of a Vermont forestland owner is over 65, when estate planning is underutilized, heirs often develop land rather than conserving it.

Ex-urbanization (the migration of urban residents to rural areas) also creates development pressure. And, the lack of and high cost of infrastructure (i.e. wastewater) in our downtowns and villages makes rural development a more common land use practice.

As a result of subdivision more parcels are being created in Vermont. For example, the number of parcels increased from 61,900 in 1983 to 88,000 in 2008. And housing development on previously undeveloped forestland is increasing too. In just the short period between 2003 and 2009, the amount of undeveloped forestland in parcels 50 acres or larger decreased by about 34,000 acres in Vermont.

Looking ahead, as this trend continues, the ability of forests to provide recreational access, watershed and flood protection, wildlife habitat, and quality wood products will decline. In addition, as forests succumb to development, we lose one of our best strategies for combating climate change since forests sequester and store carbon.

## Local, Regional & Statewide Land Use Strategies

Through a series of workshops, the Vermont Natural Resources Council (VNRC) collected feedback on regulatory and non-regulatory strategies that would reduce forest fragmentation in Vermont. While the strategies are numbered (see orange column at right), they are not ranked in any particular order. These nine were selected as effective and necessary strategies by local, regional, and state officials who, through various forms of feedback, whittled down a much longer list.

These top strategies provide a roadmap for action at the local, state, and regional level. Please read more about each strategy below and consider the recommended actions (in the green tables, starting on p.5).

# Top Strategies

## Planning & Zoning

1. Map and inventory natural resources related to forests and wildlife; use these to develop local plan maps and policies.
2. Improve the quality of existing zoning and subdivision regulations.
3. Incorporate specific standards into existing zoning and subdivision regulations to reduce forest fragmentation.

## Conservation Programs

4. Increase the acreage of lands permanently protected from development through conservation easements.
5. Increase acres enrolled in the Use Value Appraisal program ("Current Use") or a local tax stabilization program.

## Education

6. Provide education and training for local board members.
7. Educate private landowners and the general public.
8. Promote estate planning.

## Advocacy

9. Pursue legislative changes at the state level.

## Planning & Zoning

### **1. Map and inventory natural resources related to forests and wildlife; use these to develop local plan maps and policies.**

This strategy involves having towns collect data on forests and natural resources to inform their decision-making. The first step is to raise necessary funds to map resources and conduct inventories.

Volunteers can often help with data collection, but it is wise to have resource professionals conduct an inventory if the data is going to be used in a regulatory context.

After the inventory and mapping is complete, towns should integrate this new information into the town plan, zoning, and subdivision regulations. Professional planners, regional planning commissions, and government and non-government partners can help translate the science into effective policies.

The mapping and inventory process is more than just data collection - it has the potential to inspire community members to think about - and get involved in - planning for natural resource management and protection.

### **2. Improve the quality of existing zoning and subdivision regulations.**

This strategy involves the strengthening of zoning bylaws and subdivision regulations to address forest fragmentation. Updates should reinforce the notion that development should be cited to avoid the fragmentation of forests and wildlife habitat. Since the majority of development occurs in Rural Residential type districts, bylaws should include standards that maintain the viability of intact forests in these districts.

In order for this strategy to be successful, municipalities should coordinate with land use planners and regional planning commission staff. Municipalities that do not have zoning or subdivision regulations should explore the feasibility of adopting regulations so that they are

better equipped to review the impacts of development.

### **3. Incorporate specific standards into existing zoning and subdivision regulations.**

In order to be enforceable, municipal regulations must include specific standards and definitions. This means municipalities should review existing zoning and subdivision regulations and ensure that they are unambiguous and clear for applicants and development review boards.

In order for this strategy to be successful, regulations should identify the resources that are in need of attention, the specific management goals for the resources chosen, and the level of protection that may be required. The standards should guide the applicant through the process of understanding how to comply with the regulation.

Local planning or conservation commissions can begin this type of work, but municipalities should seek assistance from professional planners and regional planning commission staff to develop specific and enforceable standards.

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## Conservation Programs

### **4. Increase the acreage of lands permanently protected from development through conservation easements.**

Currently, approximately 550,000 acres are permanently protected from certain types of development via conservation easements in Vermont. An easement is a voluntary legal agreement between a landowner and non-profit land trust or government agency that limits the type or amount of development on one or more parcels of land. While limitations are placed on development, other activities are allowed and even encouraged - such as farming, maple sugaring, recreation, and woodlot management.

Many landowners donate easements, but sometimes land trusts or government agencies pay a landowner for the

development rights. Benefits that make easements attractive for landowners include a reduction in estate tax liability, a charitable income tax deduction, and for some property owners, a reduction in property taxes. Landowners are usually responsible for covering a portion of the costs associated with donating a conservation easement.

### **5. Increase acres enrolled in the Use Value Appraisal Program ("Current Use") or a local tax stabilization program.**

The Current Use Program, which is run by the State of Vermont, allows forests and farms to be taxed for their productive use, rather than their development value. Currently, approximately 1.8 million acres of forestland in Vermont are enrolled in the Program. In addition to the Current Use Program, thirty-three towns have created their own tax stabilization programs with similar tax goals.

Current Use taxation encourages conservation by lowering property taxes, making it more affordable for landowners to own large parcels of land without subdividing and selling lots to developers.

Enrollment is voluntary and, unlike a conservation easement, the land is not protected in perpetuity. Acreage can be withdrawn from the Program, but the landowner must pay a penalty. The penalty for withdrawing a portion of land, however, is very low.

In order for this strategy to be successful, education should be increased at the local level to promote enrollment and dispel myths, such as the commonly held belief that property taxes go up when land is enrolled.

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## Education

### **6. Provide education and training for local board members.**

Local conservation commissions, planning commissions, and selectboards are made up of volunteers, many of

whom lead busy lives and may not have backgrounds in natural resources or land use planning. To reduce forest fragmentation, board members need to be trained about the impacts of land use decisions on forests and wildlife resources.

Commission and board members should understand the importance of writing specific and clear policies, including solid definitions, and they should be conversant in the different regulatory and non-regulatory strategies that will reduce forest fragmentation in their community.

In order for this strategy to be successful, regional planning commissions, the Vermont Agency of Natural Resources, conservation non-profit organizations, and the Vermont League of Cities and Towns should develop effective trainings for local board members (indeed, some are already doing this).

Trainings should address sticky issues that relate to land conservation. These include the tax implications of developing land versus conserving land, and the authority for regulating different land uses.

In addition, the trainings will need to be accessible. The use of digital tools, such as pre-recorded web trainings, should be explored by trainers.

## 7. Educate private landowners and the general public.

This strategy is based on the idea that greater awareness will inspire landowners to take action at the individual and town-level. Bringing

together people with diverse interests is key. Educational efforts should help individuals identify what they love about their own land, or more broadly, the lands in their community.

It is important that educational efforts provide clear information about various conservation strategies, such as ways to get involved with a local conservation commission or regional conservation partnership. In addition, it's important to know how to dispel the myths surrounding different conservation programs.

In order for this strategy to be successful, outreach efforts should target a diverse audience. For example, it's important to talk to hunters, snowmobilers, maple sugarers, educators, foresters, loggers, and anyone else who enjoys or makes a livelihood from Vermont's forests.

## 8. Promote estate planning.

Over 80% of Vermont's forestlands are privately owned and the average Vermont forestland owner is over 65 years old. These facts indicate that many parcels are susceptible to development if landowners do not engage in estate planning to keep forestlands intact.

## Advocacy

### 9. Pursue legislative changes at the state level.

Legislative change will be necessary to stop forest fragmentation in Vermont.

Act 250 is Vermont's statewide land use law. It requires a heightened review of certain types of development and

subdivision; however, according to research conducted by VNRC, the overwhelming majority of subdivision activity does not trigger Act 250 review. This is partially because long roads no longer trigger Act 250 jurisdiction, and the secondary impacts of development associated with utility line extensions are exempt from review, even though they are a leading cause of forest fragmentation. Another issue is that even when a project triggers review, Act 250 does not address forest fragmentation.

Section 248 outlines the state's regulatory review process for telecommunications and energy transmission projects. Some participants at local workshops raised concerns that the Section 248 process does not adequately consider the impacts of energy infrastructure on forestlands - in particular, the degree to which large-scale wind projects lead to forest fragmentation.

Use Value Appraisal Program ("Current Use"). Legislative changes may be necessary to continue growing enrollment in the Program, especially since forestland is being added at a fast clip, partially due to the subdivision of land into smaller parcels that still qualify for enrollment. In order to help fund continuing enrollment, one proposal is to increase the penalty for withdrawing and developing land.

Conservation Commissions could play an important role in the development review process. State law should clarify that development review boards or planning commissions should seek input from conservation commissions when subdivision activity would affect natural resources.

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VNRC Members

### PARTNERS

Vermont Association of Planning and Development Agencies

The Regional Planning Commissions

VT Department of Forests, Parks & Recreation

VT Fish & Wildlife Dept.

### PARTNERS

VT Department of Housing & Community Development

University of Vermont Extension

Vermont Planners Association

Local town officials and citizens

# RECOMMENDED ACTIONS

STRATEGY	LOCAL	REGIONAL	STATE
<p>1) Map and inventory natural resources related to forests and wildlife; use these to inform local and regional policies.</p>	<p>CC, PC: Map and inventory natural resources related to forests and wildlife.</p> <p>CC, PC: Apply for Municipal Planning Grants (MPGs) as a funding source to map and inventory natural resources.</p> <p>CC, PC: Work with professional planners, RPCs, ANR, or VNRC to integrate inventory data into town plans, zoning and subdivision regulations.</p> <p>CC, ANR: Lead values mapping exercises that focus on the identification of natural resources.</p>	<p>RPC: Encourage towns to apply for MPGs to fund mapping and inventory.</p> <p>RPC: Assist towns with incorporating inventory data into town plans, zoning and subdivision regulations. Discuss and utilize various land use strategies, including strengthening definitions and standards.</p> <p>RPC: Integrate state natural resource data layers (habitat blocks, forest productivity, wildlife connectivity etc.) into regional plan maps and policies.</p>	<p>ACCD/DHCD: Examine making development of natural resource inventories a statewide priority for Municipal Planning Grants (MPGs).</p> <p>ANR, AVCC, VNRC: Examine the feasibility of creating a designated fund to assist with inventory and mapping.</p> <p>ANR: Promote best practices for conducting mapping and natural resource inventories and community involvement/outreach.</p> <p>ANR: Provide assistance on how to utilize state data. Integrate local inventory data into Bio Finder.</p> <p>VNRC, AVCC: Explore the use of crowd source funding platforms to aid towns with fundraising.</p>

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STRATEGY	LOCAL	REGIONAL	STATE
<p>2) Improve the quality of existing zoning and subdivision regulations to conserve forest and wildlife resources.</p>	<p>CC, PC: Identify areas of zoning and subdivision regulations that need to be updated to address forest and wildlife resources.</p> <p>CC, PC: Work with professional planners, RPCs, ANR, or VNRC to improve zoning and subdivision regulations. Leverage support from local conservation and watershed groups.</p> <p>CC, PC: Develop guidelines to advise landowners on how to site new developments (single homes, subdivisions, etc.) to avoid forest and habitat fragmentation.</p> <p>CC, PC: Ensure that local plan policies support working forests.</p> <p>CC, PC: Review and update road and trail policies to minimize forest fragmentation.</p> <p>PC, SB: Explore funding for wastewater infrastructure in downtowns and village centers.</p> <p>See “Resources” on p. 14 for guidance on how to implement these actions.</p>	<p>RPC: Improve regional plans to address forest fragmentation. Strive for having all regional plans address forest fragmentation by the end of their current planning cycle.</p> <p>RPC: Work with municipalities to improve existing zoning and subdivision regulations.</p> <p>RPC: Increase the number of municipalities with conservation and forest zoning districts, or overlay districts to protect specific resources, such as wildlife travel corridors that connect large blocks of habitat.</p> <p>RPC: Increase the number of towns with subdivision regulations, especially in regions where many towns do not have regulations.</p> <p>RPC: Continue to advocate for compact, downtown development, funding for wastewater infrastructure in downtowns and village centers, and the utilization of PUDs in surrounding areas.</p>	<p>FPR, FWD, ACCD, VAPDA, VLCT, VNRC: Develop good examples of definitions and standards to reduce forest fragmentation.</p> <p>FPR, FWD, ACCD, RPC, VAPDA, VLCT, VNRC: Develop a template for local and regional planning commissions to review the adequacy of zoning and subdivisions standards and definitions for addressing forest fragmentation.</p> <p>FPR, FWD, ACCD, VAPDA, VLCT, VNRC: Develop good examples of Rural Residential Districts to reduce fragmentation.</p> <p>VT Leg, VLCT, ANR: Explore funding for wastewater infrastructure in downtowns and village centers.</p> <p>ACCD, VAPDA, VT Leg: Develop recommendations to improve efficiency and meaningful implementation of plans and regulations. Revisit length of municipal planning cycle.</p>

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STRATEGY	LOCAL	REGIONAL	STATE
<p>3) Include specific standards in existing zoning and subdivision regulations to address forest and wildlife resources.</p>	<p>PC, CC: Review definitions in land use documents concerning important or significant natural resources. Update definitions to provide clarity.</p> <p>PC, CC: Incorporate specific standards that will minimize forest fragmentation into existing zoning and subdivision regulations.</p> <p>PC, CC: Incorporate clustering and planned unit developments through zoning and subdivision regulations.</p> <p>SB, PC, CC: Enhance green spaces and green energy design in downtown zoning districts to encourage more people to live there.</p> <p>See “Resources” on p. 14 for guidance on how to implement these actions.</p>	<p>RPC: Update regional plans to include clear policies to discourage development that fragments forests and wildlife habitat.</p> <p>RPC: Only approve municipal plans that conform to a regional policy of minimizing forest fragmentation.</p> <p>RPC: Strive for a consistent level of regional plan implementation to address fragmentation across the state.</p> <p>RPC: Assist municipalities in implementing policies under the “Local” column (left).</p>	<p>ACCD, ANR, VT Leg: Explore ways to incentivize clustering through existing or new programs, tax breaks, etc.</p> <p>ACCD, ANR, VLCT, VNRC: Develop common definitions and examples of standards for subdivision regulations and zoning districts to address forest and wildlife resources.</p> <p>ACCD, ANR, VNRC, VT Leg: Create incentives for growth inside of designated growth areas, and policies for maintaining the integrity of rural land and significant natural resources outside of growth areas.</p>

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STRATEGY	LOCAL	REGIONAL	STATE
<p>4) Increase the acreage of lands permanently protected from development through conservation easements.</p>	<p>CC, PC: Obtain a parcel map of your town and identify priority areas for conservation.</p> <p>CC, PC: Reach out to landowners of non-conserved properties to educate them about conservation programs and funding opportunities.</p> <p>CC, PC: Explore the possibility of compensating landowners for conservation efforts through a town conservation fund.</p> <p>CC: Identify a local or regional partner who can help cover the cost of transaction fees for landowners to secure conservation easements.</p> <p>CC: Educate SBs on the value of conserving land, including the tax benefits of conserving land versus developing it.</p> <p>CC, PC, SB: Create a town forest, or add land to existing town forest.</p>	<p>RPC: Assist CCs by providing technical data such as GIS maps and parcel data.</p> <p>RPC: Invite a land trust to present on conservation easements at a board meeting.</p> <p>RPC: Organize educational event for local officials and residents. Reach out to local CCs and non-profits for assistance.</p>	<p>VHCB, Cons. Groups, Land Trusts: Create a fund to help cover landowner transaction and stewardship costs for conserving forest parcels.</p> <p>VT Leg, Cons. Groups, Land Trusts: Fully fund VHCB. Examine additional funding sources for forestland conservation, such as impact fees from development, mitigation from Act 250, etc.</p> <p>Cons. Groups, Land Trusts: Explore mechanism to allow small, contiguous parcels to be combined into a single conservation easement. Continue to look for opportunities to aggregate smaller parcels into conservation projects.</p> <p>Land Trusts: Assist municipalities and RPCs in implementing policies in the “Local” and “Regional” columns (left).</p>

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STRATEGY	LOCAL	REGIONAL	STATE
<p>5) Increase acres enrolled in the Use Value Appraisal Program (“Current Use”) or a local tax stabilization program.</p>	<p>CC, PC, SB: Make educational materials on the Current Use Program available at the Town Office. In these materials, explain that municipalities are reimbursed for lost tax revenue by the state; address misperceptions about the tax implications of the program.</p> <p>CC, PC: Reach out to landowners in priority areas for conservation to educate them on current use or, if applicable, the local tax stabilization program.</p> <p>PC: Create zoning districts that are compatible with the Current Use Program (e.g. Forestry District) and promote minimum lot sizes that will allow enrollment in the Program (e.g. over 25 acres, or 27 acres if the land is going to include a dwelling).</p> <p>PC: Planned Unit Development (PUD) or conservation subdivision standards should promote open space designations that are large enough to be enrolled in the Current Use Program. Standards should also promote small enough minimum lot sizes to allow remaining open space areas to qualify for Current Use.</p>	<p>RPC: Help promote general awareness of the Current Use Program through regional outreach.</p> <p>RPC: Invite a county forester or other representative from FPR to present on the Current Use Program at a board of commissioners meeting.</p> <p>RPC: Organize an event for local officials and residents to learn more about the Current Use Program. This could be combined with education on conservation easements.</p>	<p>FPR, Dept. of Taxes, Cons. and Forestry Groups, VT Leg: Support continued enrollment in the Current Use Program; consider incentives for landowners to remain in the Program for a long period of time; address weak development penalty; explore possibility of aggregating smaller, contiguous parcels with different owners into a single management plan.</p> <p>FPR, Cons. and Forestry Groups, VT Leg: Explore the pros and cons of lowering the minimum acreage required for eligibility in the UVA Program. Explore expanding the management options for landowners, such as managing for water quality and wildlife.</p> <p>ANR, VT Leg: Increase funding for administration of the Program, including county foresters.</p>

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STRATEGY	LOCAL	REGIONAL	STATE
<p>6) Provide education and training for local board members.</p>	<p>PC, CC: Educate local board members (PC, CC, SB) on forest fragmentation.</p> <p>PC, CC: Sponsor workshops to promote better understanding of how to access information such as the ANR Natural Resources Atlas, BioFinder, and other state databases.</p> <p>PC, CC: Develop guidance to advise landowners on how to site new developments (single homes, subdivisions, etc.) to avoid fragmentation.</p>	<p>RPC, VLCT: Develop online trainings for town officials via webinars that can be accessed at any time through a broadband connection. For example, include topics such as: forest fragmentation, capital planning, and open space planning.</p> <p>RPC, VNRC, VLCT: Provide trainings for town officials in towns that have zoning to help them understand how to interpret and administer natural resource related regulations.</p> <p>RPC, VNRC, VLCT: Provide trainings for town officials in towns that do not have zoning to help them understand the benefits of zoning and subdivision regulations.</p>	<p>ACCD, VT Leg: Require local board members to undergo basic training upon joining the SB, PC, DRB, etc.</p> <p>ANR, ACCD, Cons. Groups, VNRC: Develop in-person and online trainings for town officials on natural resource planning that can be accessed at any time.</p> <p>ANR, Cons. Groups, RPC, VLCT: Help communities frame natural resource issues in economic terms for SBs. Address the tax implications and benefits of conservation v. development, economic implications of poorly built rural roads, and challenge of providing emergency response when long steep driveways are built. Help make the link between forest fragmentation and the increased need for municipal services.</p> <p>ANR, Cons. Groups, VLCT: Remind town officials that vague regulations may not be enforceable. Regulations that protect forest resources need to be clear and understandable.</p> <p>ANR, Cons. Groups, VNRC: Educate state legislators about forest fragmentation.</p>

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STRATEGY	LOCAL	REGIONAL	STATE
<p>7) Educate private landowners and the general public.</p>	<p>CC, PC, RPC: Host a meeting on what people love about their town. Reach out to broad constituency - new homeowners, older landowners, renters in town center, etc. Get as many people to the meeting as possible.</p> <p>CC: Organize presentation by land management and Cons. Groups to explain the value of keeping forests and wildlife habitat intact.</p> <p>CC: Encourage people to reach out to their neighbors to talk about the importance of their forests and conservation and management options.</p> <p>CC: Encourage use of local wood products by residents and town.</p> <p>PC, CC: Promote a broad constituency, including youth, to encourage a land ethic that is based on stewardship.</p>	<p>RCPs: Develop educational materials to give to private landowners within the region.</p> <p>RPC: Assist small groups of neighboring towns with prioritizing and collaborating on conservation projects.</p>	<p>ANR, Cons. and Forestry Groups: Develop educational materials on the benefits of forests for outreach to private landowners.</p> <p>ANR, Cons. and Forestry Groups: Educate landowners about funding options and grants for forest, wildlife and water quality improvement.</p> <p>ANR, Cons. and Forestry Groups, VHCB, VT Leg: Emphasize economics of forestry and working lands to landowners and the public at large. Promote Vermont brand of wood products and encourage use of local products in building projects.</p>

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STRATEGY	LOCAL	REGIONAL	STATE
<p>8) Promote estate planning to keep forestland intact.</p>	<p>CC, PC: Organize meeting for landowners and estate planners to review options for multi-generational planning.</p> <p>CC, PC: Post estate planning materials on municipal website for landowners (see “State” column, right).</p>		<p>ANR, Cons. and Forestry Groups: Develop online resources for landowners to engage in estate planning to keep forestland intact over multiple generations.</p> <p>ANR, ACCD, RPC, Cons. Groups: Explore the creation of a fund to cover the costs of landowners engaging in estate planning.</p> <p>Cons. Groups: Partner with accountants and lawyers to understand the conservation options that their clients want to explore.</p> <p>VHCB, ANR, VT Tax Dept., Cons. Groups, VT Leg: Promote estate planning incentives for residents to keep forestland intact over time.</p>

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STRATEGY	LOCAL	REGIONAL	STATE
<p>9) Pursue legislative changes at the state level.</p>		<p>RPC: Participate in regulatory proceedings (i.e. Act 250 or Section 248) to minimize the fragmentation of forestland and wildlife habitat.</p>	<p>ANR, VNRC, Cons. and Forestry Groups, VT Leg:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Modify Act 250 and Section 248 processes to address forest fragmentation.</li> <li>• Add criteria to Act 250 to review and mitigate forest fragmentation.</li> <li>• Address gaps in Act 250 jurisdiction. For example, reinstate Act 250 review for long roads and development that is associated with utility line extensions. Consider lowering the threshold number of lots that will trigger jurisdiction.</li> </ul> <p>ACCD, VT Leg: Create incentives for developments that maximize density and conserve open space.</p> <p>ACCD, VT Leg: Clarify the intent and use of Town Plans. Town Plans are developed as visionary documents, but are being applied in the regulatory context (Act 250, Section 248).</p> <p>VT Leg: Elevate statutory standing of CCs in municipal planning and zoning by requiring their input in permitting decisions.</p>

**Acronyms:** ACCD - Agency of Commerce & Community Development; ANR - Agency of Natural Resources; AVCC - Assoc. of VT Conservation Commissions; CC - Conservation Commissions; Cons. Groups - Conservation Groups; DHCD - Department of Housing and Community Development; FPR - VT Dept. of Forests, Parks & Recreation; FWD - VT Fish & Wildlife Dept.; PC - Planning Commissions; RCP - Regional Conservation Partnerships; RPC - Regional Planning Commissions; SB - Selectboards; VAPDA - VT Association of Planning & Development Agencies; VHCB - Vermont Housing and Conservation Board; VLCT - Vermont League of Cities & Towns; VT Leg - VT Legislature; VNRC - Vermont Natural Resources Council; VPA - Vermont Planners Association.

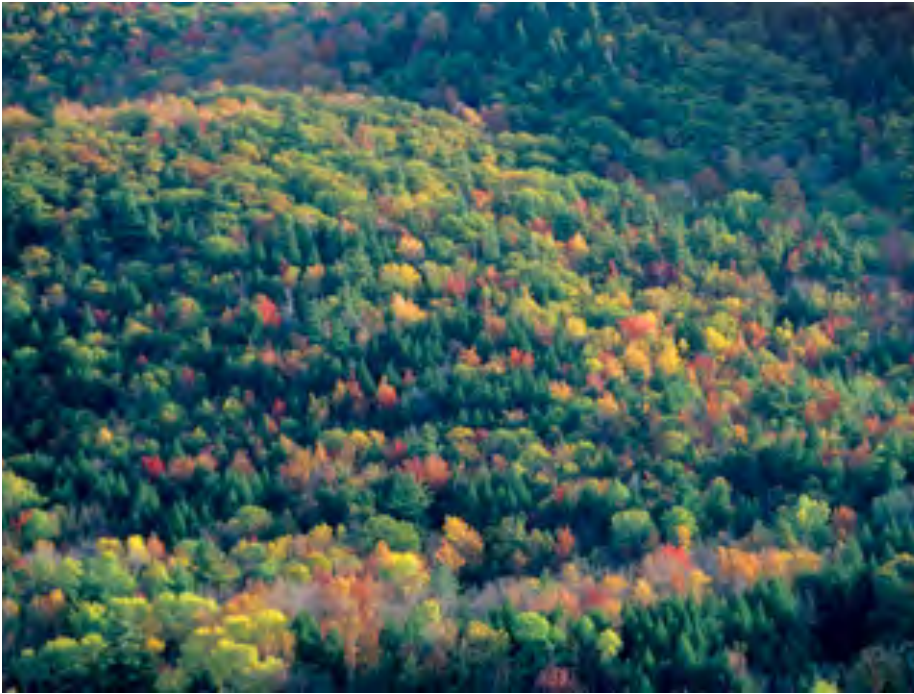


Photo: Wayne Fawbush

## Obstacles

At workshops across Vermont, participants were asked about the hurdles they would need to overcome to successfully implement these strategies. The following were most often cited:

### Chief Obstacles

- Securing necessary funding for initiatives;
- Relying too heavily on volunteers at the local level (results in volunteer burn-out/fatigue);
- Anxiety or dislike for regulation, which is seen as being driven by:
  - Town officials fearing the possibility of denying projects or being subject to a takings lawsuit,
  - Community members who fear their private property rights will be undermined, and
  - General misconceptions about regulation.

### Additional Obstacles

- Difficulty in interpreting and enforcing regulations;
- Difficulty in conserving smaller parcels, especially in non-priority areas;
- Lack of access to regional natural resources expertise;
- Lack of adherence by state regulators to local wishes in town plans;
- Many Vermonters want to reside in rural areas, but this individual choice, made over and over again, has a cumulative impact on forests.

## Next Steps

This plan identifies strategies for taking action at the local, regional and state levels to address forest fragmentation. There is no single action that will ensure the future integrity of Vermont's forests; it will take a diverse suite of strategies implemented by an array of partners.

The concept of planning requires taking a long-range view. While the cumulative impacts of development are whittling away at the integrity of our forests, there is still time to chart a course that will allow Vermont communities to thrive while maintaining forest resources.

The next step is for the local, regional, and state entities listed in this document to choose from the recommended strategies and actions and implement them. This process will take time and effort; VNRC's staff is committed to working with these entities over the long-term to reduce forest fragmentation.

## Resources

Don't forget to consult these resources as you plan your next steps:

- **Community Strategies for Vermont's Forests & Wildlife** (<http://vnrc.org/programs/forests-wildlife/guide/>)
- **Conserving Vermont's Natural Heritage** ([http://www.vtfishandwildlife.com/library/maps/Community\\_Wildlife\\_Program/complete.pdf](http://www.vtfishandwildlife.com/library/maps/Community_Wildlife_Program/complete.pdf))

## Authors:

Emma Zavez  
Conservation Planner

Jamey Fidel  
Forest and Wildlife  
Program Director

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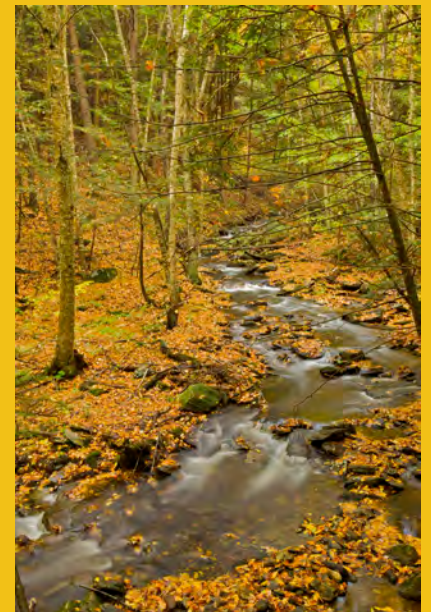


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9 BAILEY AVE.  
MONTPELIER, VT 05602

TEL: 802-223-2328

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