



**White River
Natural
Resources
Conservation
District**

28 Farmvu Drive
White River Junction, VT 05001
www.whiterivernrcd.org
whiterivernrcd@gmail.com
(802) 369-3167

White River NRC D 2024 Annual Report
December 2024

The White River Natural Resources Conservation District (NRC D) is one of Vermont’s 14 Conservation Districts, established by the 1939 Vermont Soil Conservation Act. We are a local watershed-based municipality, governed by a Board of Supervisors composed of 5 publicly elected residents of the District. We provide natural resource education, outreach, and support for farmers, land stewards, residents, landowners, municipalities, and organizations across 23 towns in portions of Orange, Windsor, Rutland, and Addison counties.



White River Conservation District Boundary

The White River Natural Resources Conservation District Board of Supervisors:

Alvina Harvey
Rochester

Kate Willard
Chelsea

Niko Horster
Vershire

Karl Thidemann
Thetford

Didi Pershouse
Thetford

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Technical Assistance Department

White River NRC D’s Technical Assistance Department aims to move towards more thorough, holistic work with individual farms, with greater impact and efficiency. Our work on Farm Teams, Farm Force, Comprehensive Conservation Planning, and holistic management is part of a larger vision to transform how Conservation Districts and technical assistance providers interact with farmers.

Edible Tree Sale

In April 2024, the White River NRC D held our first tree sale in over 8 years, during which we sold a total of **1,322** trees, supplied to the District by Yellowbud Farm. The varieties sold included chestnuts, persimmons, honey locusts, black walnuts, hazels, burr oaks, and shellbark, shagbark, and yellowbud hickories. Leftover trees were donated to our mini-nurseries. This effort to promote food-bearing trees is in support of our overarching goal to provide for food security and famine protection in our community by increasing production of staple nutritional needs in local, perennial food systems.

Tree Nurseries

This year marks significant growth for the White River NRC D Plant Nurseries, now totaling 8 sites with 43 species and over 4,600 trees. Next year, we will adopt the remainder of the Dartmouth tree nursery, nearly doubling our available trees and shrubs. Partnering with schools and communities, ReGeneration Corps has already distributed 2,000 trees to land justice projects, making diverse, low-cost plants accessible across Vermont.

Farm Team Initiative

White River NRC D has introduced and developed the Farm Team concept as a core strategy for the District. This approach aims to provide holistic support to farmers by bringing together technical assistance resources, expertise, and funding in an efficient manner. A Farm Team is an advisory group that includes a farmer’s most trusted advisors and service providers who can coordinate financial and technical support to improve environmental conditions, conservation efforts, and overall farm viability. The goal is to help farmers spend less time navigating bureaucracy and more time implementing effective conservation practices. We currently have **10 farms** fully onboarded to our Farm Team programming, with an additional **30 farms** signed up for initial intake.

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Farm Team Facilitation

We have been focusing on building the capacity of our staff and partners to implement the Farm Team approach effectively. This includes training of our staff and partners on facilitation skills, holistic management principles, and building and maintaining trusted relationships over time.

The role of a Farm Team Facilitator involves:

- Helping farmers identify their priorities and needs
- Coordinating the right experts and resources for each farm
- Ensuring efficient and effective support for farmers

MOU and UCA with USDA-NRCS

Our District maintains a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with the USDA-NRCS (Natural Resources Conservation Service). The MOU formalizes the partnership between the NRCD and NRCS and emphasizes conservation planning and the locally-led conservation as core to our shared mission. We also maintain an Unfunded Cooperative Agreement (UCA): a supplemental agreement that provides us with a desk and two laptops in the federal NRCS field office in White River Junction.

NRCS Technical Assistance

White River NRCD is contracted to provide conservation planning technical assistance directly to USDA-NRCS, funded by the National Association of Conservation Districts (NACD) and American Farmland Trust (AFT). In 2024, our staff has assisted with the following federal workload:

- 15 AFT RCPP Applications in Orange, Windsor, Caledonia, and Essex Counties
- 16 Local Funding Pool Applications and Contracts in White River & Ottauquechee Districts
- 18 Conservation Stewardship Program Evaluations in Orange and Windsor Counties

We have been training Working Lands Climate Corps members to assist with Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP) assessments, providing valuable experience in comprehensive conservation assessments and farmer engagement, while taking on a considerable workload.

Comprehensive Conservation Planning

We are working to align the Farm Team approach with Comprehensive Conservation Planning by:

- Developing a model for Comprehensive Conservation Plans
- Integrating NRCS practices and requirements into a holistic framework
- Addressing ecological, social, and financial aspects of farming
- Exploring ways to incentivize farmers to develop these plans

Agricultural Engineering Assistance

Based on [recommendations](#) that emerged from our regional coordination surveys of and discussions with Southeastern VT TA providers, our District acquired funding from NACD and hired an Agricultural Engineering Technician to address a critical bottleneck in engineering services in Orange, Windsor, Windham, and Bennington County. This position is housed at the Bennington County NRCD, and will provide “light” engineering services on NRCS Local Funding Pool applications and contracts, for practices such as: animal trails and walkways, grazing system waterlines, stream crossings, roof water runoff and catchment systems, and micro-irrigation.

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Grazing & Agroforestry Cohort

This September we wrapped our second of two dairy farmer learning cohorts, funded by the Northeast Dairy Business Innovation Center (DBIC). Our first cohort of 10 dairy farms ran from 2021-2023, during which time the farms received grazing plans written by our grazing specialist, Amber Reed, and funding plans tailored for their operation. The second cohort of 10 additional dairy farms ran from 2023-2024, and expanded our scope of services to also include agroforestry planning, written by agroforestry specialist, Kristen Jovanelly from Dartmouth Ong Lab.

- Cohort 1: Our team accessed **47** state, federal, and private financial assistance (FA) grants, totalling **\$709,005** in direct financial assistance for the 10 participating dairy farms.
- Cohort 2: Our team assisted with applying for **36** grants, **29** of which were approved, totalling **\$880,642.60** in direct financial assistance for the 10 participating dairy farms.
- This fall, Farm Force planted, mulched, and irrigated over **500 trees** in silvopasture systems, windbreaks, and riparian buffers across 6 of our participating farms.

Hickory Oil Project

The Hickory Oil Project focuses on harvesting Yellowbud aka. Bitternut Hickory Nuts to produce hickory oil as a sustainable, local alternative to olive oil and other cooking oils. Now in its growth phase, the project aims to establish commercial viability while supporting landowners and generating a sovereign wealth fund for the residents of our Conservation District. This project is a partnership between Northern Forest Foods, Yellowbud Farm, White River and Bennington NRCDs in VT, and Sullivan County NRCD in NH.

In 2024, this partnership:

- Produced nearly **30 gallons of oil** from the 2023 harvest
- Utilized the VT Legal Food Hub to develop **land access agreements** for private landowners, allowing the District to harvest hickory nuts and perform minor site maintenance, while landowners receive a tax write-off for the value of the donated nuts
- Funded the development of a **regional hickory map** by TerraGenesis, covering 8 Northeastern states (VT, NH, NY, PA, RI, CT, MA, & ME)
- Deployed a regional workforce to harvest nuts

Farm Force

In April of 2024, we launched Farm Force - a movement to develop food sovereignty and resilience on the ground to help famine-proof our communities from climate-driven drought and supply chain breakdown. Farm Force is a broad effort to mobilize (volunteer and paid) people to build more resilient agrarian-based economies and communities. The goal of Farm Force is to maintain a skilled workforce that farmers in our community can call upon for fence building, tree planting, relief milking, weeding, harvesting, and other labor needs.



Working Lands Climate Corps

We have successfully launched the largest Working Lands Climate Corps program in the country. WLCC is an AmeriCorps-style national initiative focused on climate-smart agriculture and conservation, funded by the USDA-Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) and the National Association of Conservation Districts (NACD), via the Corps Network. "Farm Force VT/VI" is a partnership between the White River NRCD, the Bennington County NRCD, and the Virgin Islands Women in Agriculture Association. The

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program provides hands-on and virtual experience in conservation planning and practices to develop the next generation of Conservation Professionals.

Key aspects include:

- 30 paid WLCC Member positions, with 15 members in Vermont and 15 in the Virgin Islands
- Members working 2 days/week for 12 months on various conservation and agriculture projects
- Assisting with USDA-NRCS program outreach and adoption
- Weekly seminars and training sessions including AgLearn coursework
- History, Research, Education, Publicity, Social Media, and Community Clubs
- Collaboration with and mentorship from local farmers and conservation professionals
- 2 weeks of “Farm Force Bootcamp” (VT - October 2024, VI - February 2025)

AgLearn Certification Cohorts

We are leading cohorts of professionals from VT and the VI, including our WLCC AmeriCorps members, in accessing AgLearn - USDA’s online training and certification system. Our goal is to assist Members in achieving Level 1 Certified Conservation Planner Status in 12 months and to increase the number of registered Technical Service Providers available in our communities. **In 2024, we assisted 42 individuals in accessing and navigating the AgLearn platform.** These individuals included staff from the Conservation Districts, NOFA-VT, American Farmland Trust, the Virgin Islands Department of Agriculture, VI Women in Agriculture Association, and members of the WLCC.

Our AgLearn support groups include:

- A structured curriculum covering various aspects of conservation planning
- Monthly online AgLearn courses that WLCC Members are required to complete
- Supplemental materials and discussion provided in monthly seminars

Farm Force Boot Camp - Vermont



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The Vermont Farm Force Boot Camp was held on October 1–9, 2024, and was designed to equip participants with critical skills in conservation agriculture, agroforestry, and climate-smart practices. We hosted 26 participants from St. Thomas and St. Croix, USVI, and 25 participants from Vermont at the Vermont State University Campus in Randolph. We engaged in hands-on learning through visits to diverse farms, including dairy, beef, vegetable, agroforestry, and maple sugar operations, exploring soil health, cropping systems, natural resources and biodiversity. The program included workshops on:

- Grazing systems, irrigation techniques, soil health, biological non-native species management, agroforestry design, engineering tools, keyline design, field safety
- Leadership and professional development, soft-skills, financial literacy

The Bus

Prior to Bootcamp, we purchased a 24 passenger bus to transport Farm Force members to sites across our watershed. This 2013 model bus was purchased for \$3,000 from a retiring bus company.



Equipment Rental Library / CRWFA Support

We continue to support the Connecticut River Watershed Farmers Alliance via a fiscal sponsorship. We co-run the local Equipment Rental Library, which hosts some District owned equipment such as a no-till drill, roller crimper, and portable scales. This work is done in furtherance of our statutory duties outlined in **10 V.S.A. § 723(6): “To make available...agricultural and engineering machinery and equipment, fertilizer, seeds, and seedlings, and such other material or equipment...for the conservation of soil resources, control of soil and stream bank erosion, and protection and conservation of natural resources.”**

Grazing & Agroforestry Workshops

This spring and summer we held two workshops on grazing and agroforestry, as part of our grazing transition cohort. These free, public workshops aimed to equip farmers with knowledge and tools to integrate biodiversity, resilience, and productivity into their farming practices.

Highlights included:

- Pollinator Support: Laura Johnson (UVM Extension) shared strategies for supporting pollinators, including mowing patterns, fallowing, species selection, and monitoring techniques.
- Pasture Rehabilitation and Grazing: Amber Reed (WR NRCD & UVM Extension) discussed pasture rehabilitation, incorporating trees into grazing systems, grazing planning, and adapting to climate change.
- Agroforestry Systems: Kristen Jovanelly (Dartmouth) discussed benefits and challenges of agroforestry, species/site selection, and system management in the context of farm ecosystems.

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Crop Insurance / Risk Management Education

In 2024, our district held several workshops and conducted outreach on Risk Management programs that are severely under-accessed by farmers in the Northeast. This work is funded by a grant through the Risk Management Agency (USDA-RMA), via the University of Delaware's Northeast Risk Management Education program.

- Pasture, Rangeland, and Forage Protection (PRF): Low-rainfall insurance for hay fields and pasture; low effort/paperwork; based on national grid of historic rainfall averages.
- Whole-Farm / Micro-Farm Revenue Protection (WFRP/MFRP): Crop insurance designed to provide revenue protection for diversified farms; currently 0 farms in VT access this insurance.
- Non-insured Crop Disaster Assistance Program (NAP): Disaster assistance, not crop-insurance; covers a portion of losses of over 50% of crops; farmers who are considered "socially disadvantaged" can access this program for free if they fill out the [CCC-860 form](#) with FSA.

Soil Health / Soil Sponge Workshops

From June - October 2024, we held a series of 8 "Soil Sponge" workshops, led by Land and Leadership Institute Director and White River NRC D Board Supervisor, Didi Pershouse. These workshops trained farmers, educators, and community leaders in practical, low-cost methods to observe and monitor soil health and biodiversity. Key field techniques included **visual soil assessment**, **biodiversity ring assessment**, **water infiltration testing**, and **aggregate stability testing**. These methods highlight the importance of soil structure and function for resilience to climate challenges, such as flooding, drought, and heatwaves, while improving water quality, biodiversity, and local food production by enhancing water absorption, recharge groundwater, and mitigate climate change while fostering healthier ecosystems and communities. The workshops aim to equip participants with tools to promote both local resilience and global climate solutions.



Green Burial Workshop

Located at the northernmost point of the White River Watershed, the **Vermont Forest Cemetery** integrates sustainable burial practices with ecological restoration. This fall we hosted a soil health workshop focusing on hands-on techniques like visual soil evaluations, water infiltration testing, and biodiversity assessments, with Didi Pershouse. The workshop emphasized the vital roles of microbes and fungi in driving decomposition, recycling nutrients, and enhancing soil structure, key to supporting biodiversity, carbon sequestration, and climate resilience. Discussions highlighted the cemetery's approach to fostering natural decomposition, enriching soil fertility, and connecting human life cycles to ecosystem renewal, offering a model for conservation-oriented land use.

Easements

Our District holds and maintains two easements on agricultural and forest land in our region. We perform regular monitoring to ensure compliance with easement contract restrictions. Our goal in the

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next year is to continue to work with Vermont Law School and the Vermont Legal Food Hub to develop “Conservation District Working Lands Easements” to support our local perennial food system.

Pay for Performance Program

Our District is subcontracted by VACD to provide Technical Assistance to farms in Orange and Windsor County for the VT Pay for Performance (Phosphorus) program, funded by VAAFMs RCPP grant from NRCS. This year we assisted 4 farms in this program. According to our records, by providing this TA, which involved uploading existing farm data into a computer model, our District received nearly equal to, and in some cases more money than, the farms we assisted under this program.

Nutrient Management Plan Updates

Our District provides Nutrient Management Plan update services to farmers in our community. We maintain a list of the **20+** farms whom we have assisted with development of NMPs in the past, and regularly check in to assist with soil and manure sampling or updates in the online GoCrop system. We provide soil sampling services free of charge, and have manure test kits available to farms in our community. We cover shipping fees and labor costs, and the farmer is responsible for the lab fees.

C.A.S.H. Tests

Our District Agronomist collected soil samples for **11** Cornell Assessment of Soil Health (CASH) tests on **4** farms this year. This work was funded by American Farmland Trust. Components of CASH include:

- **Physical:** Aggregate stability, water capacity, and compaction
- **Biological:** Organic matter, active carbon, and microbial activity
- **Chemical:** pH and nutrient availability

Lake Watershed Action Plans

In 2023 and 2024, respectively, we completed Lake Watershed Action Plans for Lake Fairlee and Lake Morey, funded by the Vermont Department of Environmental Conservation. Bear Creek Environmental provided engineering design services for these plans. Each LWAP outlines strategies to reduce sediment and phosphorus loading by reducing nutrient runoff, promoting best management practices, implementing erosion control measures, improving stormwater management and providing vegetated buffers. Lake shoreland, roads and streams were assessed. Thirty percent Conceptual designs were completed for **10** projects on Lake Fairlee and **11** projects on Lake Morey. During the public meetings with stakeholders we received feedback that human-made impacts from septic systems and road salt were seen as critical missing components in these plans to address pollution loading issues on lakes.

Lakewise Assessments

As part of developing the LWAPs, shoreland assessments were conducted to engage landowners and promote Best Management Practices through the LakeWise program. The program evaluated four property components: driveways, structures and septic systems, recreation areas, and lake access. From 2022-2023, our Conservation Specialist completed over **46** assessments across both lakes. This effort earned Lake Morey the prestigious **Gold LakeWise Award**, achieved by only four other lakes in Vermont, recognizing that over **15%** of properties met the program's high standards. We were unable to access funding in 2024 to continue providing LakeWise assessments under this state program.

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Horizons Day Camp Lakeshore Improvements

Identified as the top priority in the Lake Fairlee Watershed Action Plan, the project aims to reduce phosphorus runoff, enhance riparian and aquatic habitats, and demonstrate sustainable shoreline practices. The White River NRCD applied to the Vermont Department of Environmental Conservation's Clean Water Fund, administered through a block grant managed by the VT NRCC. The project, in partnership with the Aloha Foundation, and with assistance from Bear Creek Environmental and Ripple Engineering, finalized designs and permitting applications to replace a failing concrete wall with a bioengineered shoreline using natural stones and native vegetation.

Aquatic Nuisance Control Grant - Lake Fairlee

Our District continues to serve as a fiscal sponsor to the Lake Fairlee Association by applying annually to the VT DEC's Aquatic Nuisance Control Grant-in-aid Program. This funding supports milfoil treatment, mechanical weed pulling, and the Invasive Species "Greeter" Program on Lake Fairlee, which creates paid positions to check boats for contamination prior to entering the lake.

Outreach Department

U.S. Virgin Islands Trip - Agrifest

In February, our District was invited by the Virgin Islands Department of Agriculture (VIDA) to participate in Agrifest, the U.S. Virgin Islands' largest agricultural fair. We brought a delegation of 18 conservation professionals from Vermont to St. Croix. This trip involved farm visits, tabling at Agrifest to promote our joint workforce development program, conducting 56 interviews to feed into the USVI Local Work Group survey, assisting with their Conservation District's Local Working Group meeting, and helping with tree plantings and garden clean-up on the VIDA fairgrounds.



Local Working Group

Conservation Districts across the United States serve as the Chair of their Local Working Group, a standing subcommittee of the USDA-NRCS State Technical Committee, which considers the input of the local community to inform natural resource policies, priorities, and programs. In 2024, White River NRCD ran a public participation process to inform USDA requests and recommendations, by facilitating a survey and two public meetings in our community involving 55 residents. Here are the recommendations from our 2024 report that were officially adopted by USDA-NRCS leadership:

- "Turning on" the subsoiling aka. deep-tillage conservation practice to address soil compaction
- Creation of 2 Local Funding Pools for land stewards in the White River/Ottawaquechee Districts

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Local Funding Pool

In July of 2024, USDA-NRCS Vermont approved the opportunity for **\$1 Million** in federal funds to be spent across two Local Funding Pools for land stewards in the White River and Ottauquechee Conservation Districts in fiscal year 2025. This funding pool is based on a request submitted via our Conservation District's annual [Local Working Group Report](#). We then conducted robust and targeted outreach to ensure adequate applications were filed prior to the August 23rd deadline.

- **\$800,000** for Community Scale Agriculture and Agroforestry
- **\$200,000** for Wildlife Habitat and Riparian Plantings in the Ompompanoosuc Watershed

Local Working Group Trainings

Throughout 2024, our District Manager provided trainings on Local Working Groups and Conservation Districts in state, regional, and national forums, including:

- **February:** National Caucus of Environmental Legislators - [“How States Can Support Young Farmers and Sustainable Agriculture and Leverage Federal Resources”](#)
- **April:** Food Systems New England - [“USDA Investments in Conservation and Climate- Resilience in New England”](#)
- **May:** Wolfe's Neck Center for Agriculture & the Environment - [“OpenTEAM In-Depth Learning Series - White River Natural Resources Conservation District”](#)
- **July:** Dirt & Democracy - [“Conservation Districts 101”](#)
- **September:** VT Association of Conservation Districts - [“Locally-Led Training”](#)

VT Agricultural Water Quality Partnership Regional Coordination

As the regional coordinator for the Southeast Region of the Vermont Agricultural Water Quality Partnership, White River NRCD has been fostering collaboration between regional organizations to improve water quality through agricultural practices. We hold bi-annual meetings with TA providers in Southeastern Vermont to discuss collaboration, share learning, and strengthen relationships. Our 2024 meetings were held at Cedar Mountain Farm in Hartland and Scott Farm Orchard in Dummerston.

VT Environmental Justice Advisory Council

Our District Manager serves as the appointed representative from the Natural Resources Conservation Council (NRCC) to the Vermont Environmental Justice Advisory Council. The EJ Advisory Council has met a total of 12 times since its inception in 2023. The EJ Advisory Council and the Interagency Committee established by the Vermont Environmental Justice Act of 2022 have:

- Finalized the [Core Principles of Community Engagement](#) for state agency use in developing Community Engagement Plans
- Advocated for an adjustment to the deadlines within the EJ law to create space for meaningful community engagement throughout the implementation of the law
- Drafted a guidance document for the required environmental benefits spending reports
- Begun discussions on adjusting the definition of “Environmental Justice Focus Population”

Land Care Congress

In January, our District co-hosted the 3-day Land Care Congress in Rochester, Vermont, with the Land Care Cooperative, sponsored in large part by UVM Medical Center. The Congress brought together 40

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land-stewards, community partners, policy makers, and economists to be trained in holistic policy decision making processes and economic democracy.

Dirt & Democracy

Over the summer and early autumn, we offered an online and in-person series focused on the elements of building a democratic, agrarian social movement. Participants gathered to learn from agrarian movement leaders from across the globe. Recordings are available to view on our [website](#).

- June 9 - **Movement Organizing with James Mumm**
- June 23 - **Consensus Training with Sarah Coffey**
- July 7 - **Conservation Districts 101 with Jennifer Byrne**
- August 4 - **Notes from the US Agrarian Movement with Niaz Dorry**
- August 18 - **Reflections on Rural Regeneration in China with Sit Tsui**
- October 3 - **Climate Smart Agroforestry in VT and V.I. with Eric Toensmeier**
- October 5 - **What is Money? with Christine Desan**
- October 6 - **Regenerative Agriculture as a Climate Solution with Karl Thidemann**

G.O.A.T.

In November, our District Manager was sponsored for a second time to attend the Gathering for Open Agricultural Technology (G.O.A.T.) in Paicines, California. This 5-day “unconference” aimed to foster collaboration, innovation, and accessibility in open-source agricultural technology. Our District was featured and participated in the following ways:

- **Facilitated a panel titled “Ag Tech in Action!”**
- **Participated as a panelist in a session titled “What is Appropriate Digital Technology?”**
- **Presented Conservation District AirTable Database and Hickory Map at Demo Bazaar**
- **Attended discussions focused on ethics and interoperability of agricultural tools and data**
- **Coordinated a \$20 million joint grant application to the EPA (see graphic below)**



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Podcast

The Broke-in Vermont podcast deals with all things broken-yet-fixable in Vermont! We discuss policies and resources relating to agriculture, the environment, housing, transportation, food, and the local economy. Guests include Vermont community members, farmers, lawmakers, educators, and business owners. On each podcast we deep dive on a topic of interest, share relevant resources relating to funding and public participation opportunities, and discuss ideas on how to fix the broken-things. Brought to you by Jennifer Byrne from the White River NRC D and Airon Shaw from the Vermont Professionals of Color Network. Available on Apple Podcasts, Spotify, and other podcast platforms.

Education Department

In 2024, the White River NRC D adopted or “grafted” with the ReGeneration Corps, a program focused on connecting youth to experiential learning on local climate solutions, through the lens of a Just Transition. The ReGeneration Corps has been building relationships with local schools and teachers to enhance connections with community climate projects. This programmatic grafting will enable the development of a comprehensive curriculum focused on regenerative agriculture, agroforestry, soil health, and composting. The program also provides sites and teaching opportunities for Farm Force Members at schools, on farms, at our newly acquired tree nurseries, and in the community at large.

Hands-On Learning Opportunities

The Grafting of White River NRC D and ReGeneration Corps’ education programs will allow us to expand hands-on collaborations between high school students, farmers, educators and community members. We co-manage a number of community sites including food forests, orchards, a food justice garden, and tree nurseries, each offering an array of year round community learning and service projects to engage with. These include:

- Planting and maintaining food forests and riparian buffers
- Engaging in soil sampling and testing activities
- On-farm field trips and work projects
- Maintaining native plant nurseries throughout the region
- Supporting the Upper Valley Super Compost Project

Curriculum Development

We are aiming to create both short, 20-40 minute exercises and more in-depth 3-5 part series for youth on local topics related to climate solutions. We will develop this curriculum and activity guide in collaboration with our Advisory Board, teachers, and community partners and we will continue working with elementary through high schools throughout the region.

Flexible Pathways Program

The ReGeneration Corps leverages the Flexible Pathways program, established under **16 V.S.A. § 941**, to offer credit-bearing opportunities for high school students involved in work- and community-based learning opportunities, which can count toward graduation requirements. This allows us to integrate our educational offerings and curriculum into existing school structures.



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Envirothon Participation

White River NRC D has been working to support and revitalize Vermont's participation in the international Envirothon, a high school team-based competition that covers 5 topics: soil, forestry, aquatics, wildlife, and a current issue. Our District Manager serves on the VT Envirothon Steering Committee and is helping to develop state-specific curriculum and to recruit and train school teams.

Upper Valley Teaching Place Collaborative

We presented on ReGeneration Corps, Farm Force, and the Envirothon at this annual conference that brings together environmental educators from around the state.

ECAP

We serve as the Topic Champion for the Equitable Climate Action Partnership, providing consultation and mentorship to teachers engaged with climate action projects in their schools on topics related to school gardening and food justice.

Summer Programs

We are in the process of building a summer program that will serve to connect high schoolers to food-producing sites throughout the Upper Valley. This will provide intensive, hands-on learning experiences in both conservation practices and agriculture, while supporting school gardens and food forests throughout the summer months.

Advisory Board Development

We are in the process of setting up an advisory board for our education programs, involving various community partners and educators to guide and support our initiatives.

Community Partnerships

This place-based education work would not be possible without a wide range of community partnerships. Building relationships with local organizations is essential to broadening the network of possibilities and horizons for both youth and farmers. Our educational partnerships include collaborations with the VT Agroecology School, Vital Communities, the Equitable Climate Action Partnership, the Upper Valley Resilience Network, the White River Valley Resilience Hub, and the Mycelium Meets Collective that includes over 70 individuals from Vermont schools and organizations.

Research Department

Conservation District Enabling Legislation National Database

For nearly 3 years, our District has been leading teams of law students in an effort to develop the U.S. Conservation District Legislation [Database](#), a comprehensive resource detailing conservation districts enabling legislation for **all 58 U.S. states and territories**. Based on the 1936 model legislation, the database includes links to each state's conservation district laws and organizes them into coded sections for clarity and searchability. The project's goal is to have NACD host the AirTable database as a public resource, supporting policy, education, and advocacy efforts.

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The AirTable database:

- Highlights key aspects such as board composition and district powers, making it easy to compare laws across states;
- Serves as a tool to demonstrate the legal infrastructure and capabilities of conservation districts, empowering stakeholders with actionable insights on their roles and services, from equipment rental to conservation programs;
- Has been verified once for accuracy and is undergoing state-level review to confirm interpretations.

Partners and Funders include: Vermont Law School, USDA's National Agricultural Library, and NACD

Biodiversity Study

The study, now in its early stages, is designed to track above and below ground biodiversity in various farming systems, providing farmers information on how biodiversity is increasing with changes in their land management. The study aims to provide tangible evidence of how farming practices influence biodiversity and soil health, offering actionable insights for land managers.

Key components include:

- Above-ground biodiversity counts using transects to track plant diversity over time;
- Below-ground soil health assessments examining microbial activity, mycorrhizae counts, and soil structure through laboratory and field methods;
- Standardized protocols are being developed to ensure consistency across locations and to balance scientific rigor with practical applications for farmers.

Partners include: New Hampshire Academy of Science, ReGeneration Corps, Farm Force

Black Lime / Rock Dust Study

This multi-year project aims to determine whether rock dust, which provides essential minerals and stimulates biological activity, can significantly enhance soil structure and crop outcomes. Led by our Agronomist, Willie Gibson, this project is exploring the potential benefits of applying native Vermont rock dust (black lime) to agricultural soils to improve soil health and crop productivity.

Key trial activities include:

- Control and treated areas on no-till corn fields
- Winter cover crops rolled down prior to planting in both sections
- Black lime applied at a rate of 500–600 lbs/acre
- Soil samples collected before application using the Cornell Assessment for Soil Health
- Harvested corn to compare yields between treated and control areas; collected whole-plant yield data for further analysis; frozen corn ears await evaluation to assess crop quality
- Follow-up soil sampling planned for Spring

Partners include: Birch Meadow Farm, Rock Dust Local

Public Banking and Agricultural Funding

We are exploring the development of a pilot project in Vermont to establish a public banking option that could provide upfront funding for farmers holding conservation grant contracts, offering a cost-effective alternative to private loans. The partnership is also exploring expanding public banking concepts to other areas, such as housing, to reduce costs in tackling issues like homelessness.

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Next steps include:

- Credit Needs Assessment: A comprehensive review of funding patterns, gaps, and existing financial sources, including loans, to identify shortfalls and inform improved financing strategies.
- Exploring a State Public Banking Option: Analyzing the feasibility of a public bank, possibly at the Conservation District level, to address predictable funding shortfalls, such as bridge funding for federally funded projects, by examining past efforts and potential benefits.

Partners include: Program on the Study of Capitalism at Harvard University, Food Law and Policy Clinic at Harvard Law School, University of Colorado Boulder School of Law

2025 Legislative Requests

Update the Vermont Soil Conservation Act (Title 10, Chapter 31)

Recommendation 1: Remove mortgage restriction language 10 V.S.A. § 723(5)

Context: VT is the only state in the country with language prohibiting mortgages on real estate property for conservation districts. This restriction severely limits our options for acquiring land or office space.

Recommendation 2: Update composition of the NRCC 10 V.S.A. § 703

Context: Fix outdated Agency names, specifically:

- “Chair of the State Forests and Parks Board” should be updated to: “Commissioner of the Forest, Parks, and Recreation Department”
- “Chair of the State Fish and Wildlife Board” should be updated to: “Commissioner of the Fish and Wildlife Department”
- “Director of the State Planning Office” should be removed and potentially replaced with another statewide planning organization, such as VHCB.

Recommendation 3: Change “Landowner” language back to “Land Occupier” or “Resident” 10 V.S.A. § 719, § 723(4), § 723(6)

Context: Current language restricts voting rights and services to “landowners”. **This is likely unconstitutional.** According to our database, only 7 states in the U.S. require landownership for voting in Conservation District elections: Alabama, Arizona, Arkansas, Colorado, Mississippi, Tennessee, and Vermont. Guam and Missouri use the term landowner but also allow for alternatives.

Increase Appropriations to the Conservation Districts

We are requesting the Natural Resources Conservation Council’s base budget be increased from \$360,000 to **\$3,000,000 in the VAAF’s FY26 budget** to support ongoing operations of Vermont’s 14 Conservation Districts and our statewide council, the NRCC, which is referred to as an Agency of the State in our enabling statute. This increase in funding would allow NRCC to hire critical staff and host a website, and would allow the 14 individual Conservation Districts to be able to sustain and expand access to our state and federal legislatively mandated core services, conduct meaningful ongoing community engagement, respond to emergent needs and disasters, and leverage millions of dollars of federal funds into Vermont.

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Farm Bill Request

Request to Congress: Fund Conservation Districts Through the Farm Bill

Since the 1930s, conservation districts have been the backbone of locally-led conservation efforts, created to address critical natural resource challenges and implement federal conservation programs. Despite their nearly century-long service, the federal government has never directly invested in this vital, decentralized, national infrastructure for democratic decision making.

There exist about 3,000 conservation districts across all U.S. states and territories. **We respectfully request that Congress allocate \$100,000 annually to each conservation district nationwide in the new Farm Bill.** This modest investment would enable districts to fulfill their federally mandated responsibilities, improve government efficiency, and enhance environmental outcomes.

Why Fund Conservation Districts Now?

1. A Long-Standing, Unfunded Infrastructure:

- Conservation districts were created in the 1930s during the Dust Bowl era to address soil erosion and water management. For nearly 90 years, they have implemented federal conservation priorities without dedicated federal funding, relying instead on inconsistent state and local resources.
- The result is a patchwork of underfunded districts struggling to fulfill their mandated roles in administering programs like the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP), ensuring compliance with Highly Erodible Land and Wetland Conservation provisions, and approving Conservation Plans.

2. Recognized in Federal Law but Never Funded:

- Though they are state-level bodies, Conservation districts are specifically referenced in the Food Security Act of 1985 for their role in conservation planning and compliance for Highly Erodible Lands and Wetlands, as well as in administering programs like the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP).
- The Code of Federal Regulations (CFR) highlights the critical role districts play in delivering technical assistance, developing conservation plans, and facilitating compliance with federal guidelines.
- Federal guidance mandates that districts lead local working groups, which bring together community stakeholders to ensure conservation programs address locally identified resource concerns. These efforts are integral to the locally-led conservation process, ensuring programs are effective and responsive to community needs.

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3. Improving Government Efficiency:

- Conservation districts streamline federal conservation efforts by serving as a single, trusted point of contact for landowners, reducing the need for redundant federal staff and administrative oversight.
- Adequately funding districts allows them to lead on-the-ground implementation, ensuring programs are tailored to local needs and delivered effectively.

4. Enhanced Environmental Outcomes:

- Districts' local expertise enables them to design conservation strategies that directly address community challenges, improving soil health, water quality, and habitat restoration.
- This tailored approach ensures federal conservation dollars achieve maximum environmental impact, avoiding the inefficiencies of one-size-fits-all solutions.

5. Cost Savings Through Decentralization:

- Funding conservation districts would reduce the federal administrative burden by empowering a decentralized, locally-led system that is already in place.
- This investment will save taxpayer dollars over time by focusing resources on actionable conservation work rather than unnecessary bureaucratic layers.

The Proposal: We urge Congress to include \$100,000 per year for each conservation district in the new Farm Bill, for a total annual line item of about \$300,000,000, an estimated 0.3% of the average annual Farm Bill expenditures. This funding will:

- Empower districts to meet their federal mandates, including leading the locally-led conservation process and ensuring program compliance.
- Strengthen community engagement through local working groups, fostering trust and collaboration between federal agencies, landowners, and stakeholders.
- Ensure districts have the staff and resources needed to implement federal conservation priorities effectively and equitably.

Conclusion

For nearly a century, conservation districts have served as the nation's decentralized, democratic conservation infrastructure without direct federal investment. Funding these districts through the Farm Bill is a necessary step to modernize and strengthen their capacity to address today's resource challenges. This modest annual allocation of \$100,000 per district will reduce redundancies, improve government efficiency, and deliver better environmental outcomes while honoring the locally-led conservation model that has been the foundation of American conservation since the 1930s. We respectfully request that Congress prioritize this funding in the new Farm Bill to ensure the continued success of this essential infrastructure.

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FY 2024 Financials
July 1, 2023 - June 30, 2024

FY24 Income	
Grants - Federal, State, and Private	\$531,193.49
Tree Sale	\$9,878
Total Income	\$541,071.49

FY24 Expenses	
Personnel	\$315,468.98
General District Expenses	\$49,770.00
Project / Grant Expenses	\$134,347.67
Total Expenses	\$499,586.65

Thank you to our Funders:

VT State Appropriations via VT Natural Resources Conservation Council (NRCC) · National Association of Conservation Districts (NACD) · VT Agency of Agriculture, Food and Markets (VAAFMM) · Northeast Risk Management Education (NERME) · American Farmland Trust (AFT) · Northeast Dairy Grazing Innovation Center (DBIC) · VT Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC) · USDA-NRCS via The Corps Network · Jack & Dorothy Byrne Foundation · Cotyledon Fund ·

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Staff and Board

STAFF		
Name	Position	# Years
Jennifer Byrne	District Manager	6
Lisa Niccolai	Forester / Conservation Specialist	7
Lyle Nichols	Agriculture Resource Specialist / Conservation Planner	4
Amber Reed	Grazing Specialist	4
Bruce Howlett	Grazing and Conservation Planner	2
Jake Jacobs	Risk Management Educator / Farm Teams Coordinator	2
Willie Gibson	Agronomist / Farm Teams Facilitator	1
Jaiel Pulskamp	Public Information Officer	1
Karen Ganey	ReGeneration Corps Education Lead	½
Celia Cerulli-Johnson	Licensed Bus Driver	¼
BOARD of SUPERVISORS		
Alvina Harvey	Chair, Education Department Oversight	10+
Niko Horster	Treasurer, Technical Assistance Department Oversight	6
Karl Thidemann	Research Department Oversight	5
Kate Willard	Secretary, HR Dept Oversight, NRCC Finance Committee	2
Didi Pershouse	Outreach Dept Oversight, VACD Board Representative	1



**White River
Natural
Resources
Conservation
District**

28 Farmvu Drive
White River Junction, VT 05001
www.whiterivernrcc.org
whiterivernrcc@gmail.com
(802) 369-3167