



Vermont River Conservancy

CONSERVATION PLAN

2026

Emanuel Soza-Foias

For more than 30 years, Vermont River Conservancy has operated at the nexus of climate change and community wellbeing. We've protected more than 100 places along rivers – floodplains and wetlands, swimming holes and paddlers' trails. When volunteers came together to launch this important work decades ago, global warming was just beginning to hit the mainstream lexicon and new no trespassing signs demonstrated the clear need to protect communities' access to water.

Today, the need to protect and restore rivers is even greater. More than 70% of our waterways are stuck in channels that carry fast-moving water into downtowns and village centers, speed alongside roads, and increase harmful erosion. Every river in the state is captured behind concrete dams that make floods worse, raise water temperatures, and spur algae blooms. Headwater forests that are finally growing back after 100 years of recovery from clearcuts are being eyed for logging long before their spongy soils, cool seeps, and vibrant wetlands have a chance to fully recover. In the decades since we started this work, more and more homes, businesses, and roads have sprouted up alongside rivers and streams, sacrificing rivers' natural movements across the land and putting more and more people in harm's way. And no trespassing signs continue to threaten communities' shared access to local waterways.

The impacts of land use – the ways we've collectively treated our land and rivers – are now exacerbated by climate change, seen in wide pendulum swings: flood, drought, flood. Hidden within these extremes are the stories of families forced to flee from floods, neighbors helping neighbors salvage memories from silty muck, farmers grappling with seasons of too much then too little, water, and businesses shuttered for months at a time. Each of these experiences ties to individual and collective wellbeing – education, economy, agriculture, and more – with ripple effects across our communities.

Now is the time to truly change how we treat our land and water – protect open space where rivers can safely spill across the land, restore wetlands that can filter water in hummocky soils, remove the dams that make floods worse and cut fish off from cool streams, help people move back from the river, and allow forests to grow old so that their spongy soils and towering canopies can hold more water and more carbon. And in the process, we can create riverfront parks where people can connect with natural waterways and know the joys of cool, fresh water. **Because our communities deserves clean water and peace of mind during the next big flood.**



Kassia Randzio



Evan Kay

A Conservation Strategy for Vermont's Rivers and Communities

There's work to be done. A lot of it. And we know we can't do all things in all places, all at once. That's why we're strategically consolidating our efforts for maximum impact.

PRIORITY WATERSHEDS

Our work is rooted in land and water, which is why we turned to *fluvial geomorphology* – the science of how water shapes the land. We leveraged scientific data and mapping analytics to identify sub-watersheds and specific stream reaches where rivers are most likely to move and shift over time. These tools also identify places where rivers are hemmed in by roads, bridges, and berms. These are places where we can use one of our key conservation tools – river corridor easements – to give these rivers the gift of space and time to restore natural meanders, wetlands, and floodplain forests.

Community wellbeing is at the heart of our work, which is why our next step was to add social values mapping. We waded through a morass of data to identify key factors that would influence community-level flood resilience: economic factors, access to the internet, English as a second language, access to transportation, and more. We overlaid these values across initial hydrologic mapping to ensure our conservation efforts will benefit the most vulnerable Vermonters.

Pulling these elements together – *fluvial geomorphology* and social values mapping – we identified **nine priority watersheds** where we plan to focus our efforts over the next 3 years.



VRC Staff



Watershed by Watershed

We tested our place-based, community-based methodology in the Lamoille Basin, a watershed hard hit by 2023 *and* 2024 flooding, where a patchwork of close-knit communities, rural agricultural lands, and large forest lands represent the mosaic of land-use patterns statewide.

Our approach is to:

- **Analyze geospatial data to identify sub-basins** where rivers are particularly active and people are particularly vulnerable, then zoom in deeper to identify dozens of priority parcels within the watershed.
- **Turn to partner organizations with valuable local insights** to bolster our collective understanding of priority parcels for conservation.
- **Connect with landowners and get out on the ground to vet our findings** and explore who might be interested in working with us towards a conservation vision that will benefit communities, rivers, and wildlife, opening doors to protect and restore lands that will have the biggest benefits for people upstream and downstream.

Over the coming years, we'll bring this “deep dive” approach to each of our nine prioritized basins.



Kassia Randzio



Chase Franklin

Community by Community

We know we'll be most successful when communities share our vision for connected conservation lands – for flood and drought resilience, clean water, recreation, and community wellbeing

Which is why we're focusing our community engagement in prioritized geographies:

- **Community outreach and education** via field-based river tours, presentations, and volunteer work days to plant trees, clean up a river, or build a trail – broadening communities' understanding of the challenges facing local waterways and the many opportunities for conservation.
- **Relationships with civic leaders** from conservation commissions, to select boards, to town clerks – decision-makers and influencers who can help support long-term stewardship of protected lands, and share locally crafted insights to shape our conservation efforts.



Hayley Kolding

Year by Year

Of the nine priority watersheds, some are places Vermont River Conservancy has worked for years or decades, where we have deep networks of community members, civic leaders, and partners ready to fast-track conservation. Other places like the Passumpsic, Memphremagog, and Poultney-Mettawee are geographies newer to our work, where we'll lead with outreach, education, and relationship-building, and then move towards conservation easements and floodplain restorations.



Linda Lemcke

To get there, we aim to:

- **Build new tools.** Nearly all of our 100+ easements are held in tandem with partners. To become more nimble and efficient, we're building a new easement template and developing "best management practices" to guide any future forest management to prioritize water, wildlife, and flood resilience.
- **Look to the headwaters.** Our signature river corridor easements work best along valley-bottom rivers, but every river starts in headwater forests. We're developing mapping analyses to identify the best opportunities for headwater forest protection.
- **Incorporate recreation.** For many conservation projects, we envision interweaving recreation alongside conservation – a forested floodplain that includes walking paths, or a protected river corridor with space to launch a canoe. We're working with partners to help refine where we can best meet communities' recreation needs.
- **Deepen community roots.** Our small team can stretch to work in each of the nine priority watersheds, but we know we'll be most effective when we have the wisdom and support of the people who live and work in these communities. We have clear staffing gaps in northeastern and southwestern Vermont, and look to add new community-rooted staff in these geographies over the next 2-3 years.



Michele Nomides

Every climate model predicts Vermont will see more floods and more droughts. The "next big one" is coming. Bobcats, brook trout, and bitterns deserve cool, connected, protected waterways. And every kid deserves to grow up in a place where they can splash in their local river.

We protect and restore rivers – a key solution for our rivers and communities – and with newly focused conservation priorities, we look to amplifying our impact **for people and wildlife.**



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