Department of Forests, Parks and Recreation's Environmental Justice Deliverable: Baseline Spending Report

The Department of Forests, Parks and Recreation's Baseline Spending Report for July 1, 2022 to June 30, 2025 (SFY23-SFY25). Prepared to meet the requirements of 3 V.S.A. §6004(g) under Vermont's Environmental Justice Law.

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Executive Summary

The Department of Forests parks and Recreation (FPR or the Department) is responsible for conserving and managing Vermont's forest resources, operating and maintaining the State Park system, promoting outdoor recreation, and coordinating the acquisition and administration of Agency of Natural Resources (ANR) lands. Through these responsibilities, FPR provides substantial environmental benefits to Vermonters, including clean air, clean water, healthy land, green spaces, outdoor recreational facilities, and public health and wellness benefits. These benefits are broadly shared across the state and region and are central to Vermonters' quality of life.

This Baseline Environmental Benefit Spending Report was prepared to meet the requirements of 3 V.S.A. § 6004. It is narrowly tailored to the scope, definitions, and methodological expectations established in the Environmental Benefit Spending Report Guidance and is not intended to capture the full range of FPR activities that confer environmental benefits. In addition to meeting statutory requirements, this report provides an opportunity for the Department to assess how its reportable investments align with environmental justice goals and to identify gaps and opportunities for improvement.

All FPR programs underwent a comprehensive and systematic review to determine applicability to the report. The Department conducted an internal assessment using readily available financial and programmatic data, supplemented by staff subject-matter expertise across divisions. This review included evaluating program purpose, statutory authority, funding mechanisms, and the degree of decision-making discretion exercised by FPR. Particular attention was given to identifying direct investments that met the Environmental Benefits Spending Guidance criteria, with a focus on competitively awarded grants for which FPR maintained clear award authority and funding control.

Through this robust screening process, FPR ensured that all potentially eligible programs were carefully considered and consistently evaluated against the Guidance's standards. For the reporting period of July 1, 2022 through June 30, 2025, FPR identified four programs that met the applicable criteria, representing approximately $8.3 million in investments in communities and projects across Vermont. Investment locations are reported at the municipal level, reflecting current data availability and geographic reporting constraints.

The Department began its assessment by identifying environmental benefits as defined in the Vermont Environmental Justice Law (3 V.S.A. §6002(1)).

While the Department of Forests, Parks and Recreation's work consistently provides environmental benefits by advancing environmental protection and public benefit statewide, the majority of these benefits are realized through core governmental functions, including long-term stewardship, land management, regulatory oversight, planning, and sustained operation of state lands and programs. These activities are foundational to the Department's mission and generate significant environmental value; however, they are not structured as discrete, grant-based, or competitively awarded investments that can be readily quantified for purposes of this report.

Accordingly, most of FPR's environmental contributions fall outside the defined scope and reporting parameters of this Baseline Spending Report.

The direct investments included in this report consist of grants administered through the Land and Water Conservation Fund, the Recreational Trails Program, the Vermont Recreational Trails Fund, and the Vermont Outdoor Recreation Economic Collaborative. These programs primarily support the development and enhancement of outdoor recreational facilities and venues, thereby advancing environmental and public access benefits. Given the scale of use and the broad reach of these resources, the Department determined that these investments generally have a Tier 2 impact radius, as their benefits extend beyond the host municipality and serve regional or statewide populations.

In addition to these programs, the Department reviewed other initiatives for potential inclusion. Certain initiatives were excluded because they did not meet the Guidance's definition of direct investments or because the necessary data were not available in a form that allowed for reporting at the level of specificity required by the Guidance. Developing the systems and capacity to capture and report this information would require additional staff resources and dedicated funding.

Although not included in this report, these initiatives remain integral to the Department's mission and continue to provide significant environmental and public benefits to communities across Vermont.

The Department does not currently maintain consistent systems to quantify environmental benefits across programs, and this report therefore does not include benefit quantification beyond identifying the general types of benefits provided.

Quantifying environmental outcomes attributable to specific investments would require consistent modeling methodologies to ensure uniformity, comparability, and methodological rigor across programs. Under current circumstances, developing and applying such modeling is not feasible.

Preparing this report highlighted both the strengths of FPR's existing programs and the limitations of current financial, data, and analytical systems. Advancing toward more comprehensive benefit quantification would likely require the development of standardized modeling frameworks, enhanced financial and data management systems, and additional staff capacity to support analysis and reporting. These improvements would be contingent upon the availability of dedicated funding.

What does FPR do?

The Department of Forests, Parks and Recreation is responsible for the conservation and management of Vermont's forest resources, the operation and maintenance of the State Park system, and the promotion and support of outdoor recreation for Vermonters and our visitors. In addition, FPR is responsible for the acquisition, planning coordination and administration of all Agency of Natural Resources lands. Department employees are stationed throughout Vermont, including offices in Montpelier and at five regional locations.

FPR's divisions are:

- Forests, inclusive of the following programs:
    - Forest Health
    - Wildland Fire
    - State Lands
    - Private Lands
    - Forest Economy
    - Urban & Community Forestry
- Vermont State Parks
- Lands Administration and Recreation, inclusive of the following programs:
    - State Lands Administration
    - Conservation
    - Recreation
    - Land Surveying

The Department of Forests, Parks and Recreation (FPR or the Department) is committed to advancing the goals and requirements of Vermont's Environmental Justice Law. The Department recognizes the importance of ensuring that environmental benefits are delivered equitably and that historically underserved and overburdened communities are meaningfully considered in state decision-making. In implementing the Law, the Department is committed to transparency, accountability, and continuous improvement in how it evaluates, documents, and delivers environmental benefits across Vermont.

This report reflects that commitment and represents an ongoing effort to align Department programs and investments with the principles of environmental justice established in statute.

FPR's Relationship to Environmental Benefits Under the VT Environmental Justice Law

FPR's work directly advances the environmental benefits identified in Vermont's Environmental Justice Law. Through forest stewardship, land conservation, outdoor recreation infrastructure, and support for forest- and recreation-based economies, FPR contributes to clean air, clean water, healthy land, green spaces, outdoor recreational facilities, and public health and wellness.

While many of these benefits are broadly shared and not tied to discrete investments, they enhance Vermonters' ability to function and flourish by maintaining access to natural resources, mitigating climate impacts, and supporting physical and mental health through outdoor recreation opportunities.

For the most part, the environmental benefits conferred by FPR investments are not localized. For example, Vermont State Parks draw people from across the state and region, as do recreational trails. Infrastructure investments on state lands, such as state park facilities and roads and other water quality improvements, are determined by the needs of existing landholdings and restrictions of funding sources.

Purpose of Spending Report

This report was prepared to meet the requirements of 3 V.S.A. § 6004, and to provide an opportunity for the Department to assess and consider areas for improvement in equitable distribution of environmental benefits. It is narrowly tailored to meet the requirements of the Environmental Benefit Spending Report Guidance, reflecting the scope, definitions, and methodological expectations established by the Agency of Natural Resources, and does not attempt to capture all of the Department's activities or outcomes that may provide environmental benefits outside the Guidance's defined framework.

Methodology

All FPR programs were reviewed for applicability to the reportable content as defined in the Guidance document. Program staff from all three divisions met with business office and commissioner's office staff to determine which programs met the criteria for direct

investments with readily available data. This review included programs across all divisions and funding sources, regardless of whether they ultimately met the criteria for inclusion as direct investments.
For the purposes of this report, FPR focused on direct investments that were the result of a competitive process; that is, grants for which FPR was not simply the administering body with decisions made by another organization.

In applying the Guidance, the Department relied on readily available data, institutional knowledge, and the professional expertise of program and business office staff. The Department applied a level of rigor that exceeded the reasonable-effort threshold described in the Guidance, including cross-program review, internal consultation, and multiple working sessions to ensure consistent interpretation of definitions and criteria.

For this first Report from July 1, 2022 to June 30, 2025, FPR is reporting on four programs that invested $8.3 million to communities and projects throughout Vermont. The location of the investment is provided at the municipal level. FPR did not report on the investment location at the census block group level in this report.

Environmental Benefits Framework

The working group began the assessment with identifying environmental benefits, defined as “the assets and services that enhance the capability of communities and individuals to function and flourish in society. Examples of environmental benefits [are] access to a healthy environment and clean natural resources, including:

- Air, water, land, green spaces, constructed playgrounds, and other outdoor recreational facilities and venues;
- Affordable clean renewable energy sources;
- Public transportation;
- Fulfilling and dignified green jobs;
- Healthy homes and buildings;
- Health care;
- Nutritious food;
- Indigenous food and cultural resources;
- Environmental enforcement; and
- Training and funding disbursed or administered by governmental agencies.”

All of FPR’s work confers environmental benefits: nurturing our forests and outdoor recreation infrastructure provide Vermonters with clean air and water, mitigate climate change, and support public health and wellness. Using the terms defined in the

Environmental Benefits Spending Report guidance document, the primary benefits are green spaces; clean air, water, and land; and outdoor recreational facilities and venues. Many of these benefits are delivered through stewardship, planning, regulation, and ongoing management of state lands and facilities rather than through discrete, reportable investments. As a result, not all environmental benefits provided by the Department are captured in this report.

Geographic Identification and Impact Radius Methodology

For reportable direct investments, the Department identified geographic locations based on the physical location of funded projects and reported those investments at the municipal level. This approach reflects the highest level of geographic specificity currently supported by readily available program and financial data.

More granular geographic reporting, such as sub-municipal analysis or more precise benefit distribution mapping, would require data systems and tracking methodologies that are not presently in place. Developing this level of specificity would necessitate enhancements to financial and grant management systems, standardized data collection protocols across programs, and potentially new data-gathering methodologies. Implementing such improvements would require additional funding, dedicated staff capacity, and sustained operational support.

Impact radius determinations were made using the tiered framework outlined in the Guidance. Programs were evaluated based on the scale of use, the uniqueness of the resource, and the extent to which benefits extend beyond municipal boundaries. Investments that serve regional or statewide populations were categorized as Tier 2, reflecting their broader reach beyond the host community.

Direct Investments

Direct investments are defined in the Guidance document as direct investment of funds such as grants, loans, and payments. The environmental benefits provided by the Vermont Department of Forests, Parks & Recreation that were identified as direct investments are grants through the Recreational Trails Program, the Land and Water Conservation Fund, the Vermont Outdoor Recreation Economy Collaborative, and the Vermont Recreational Trails Fund. All convey the environmental benefit of outdoor recreational facilities and venues.

Land and Water Conservation Fund

The Land and Water Conservation Fund Program (LWCF) became effective in January 1965 to create parks and open spaces, protect wilderness and forests, and provide

outdoor recreation opportunities. Funds are derived from federal recreation fees, Outer Continental Shelf (OCS) revenues from leasing oil and gas sites in coastal waters, federal surplus real property sales, and a portion of federal motorboat fuel taxes. Funds are apportioned to federal agencies, and to the 50 states and 6 territories through the U.S. Department of the Interior National Park Service (NPS). In Vermont, LWCF is administered by the Vermont Department of Forests, Parks & Recreation. LWCF grants provide up to 50% matching assistance to the state and local governments.
Project applications are scored and ranked by a project application ranking committee following the Open Project Selection Process (OPSP) using established criteria. The resulting recommendations are reviewed and approved by the ranking committee. All applications must meet an identified need within the draft Statewide Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan (SCORP) and address local and regional needs. This graphic summarizes the SCORP.

Municipalities must agree to dedicate the park or area where the project is located for public outdoor recreational use in perpetuity. In addition, the grantee must also agree to develop, operate, and maintain the development to acceptable National Park Service (NPS) standards for public outdoor recreation. Grants are subject to approval by the National Park Service (NPS).

Reimbursement, Request Amounts, and Match Requirements

LWCF is a reimbursement program, and grantees must be capable of financing the project and (after a grant agreement is fully executed) first paying for expenditures and then submitting a request to the State for reimbursement using the required documentation. Applicants must commit to a minimum 50% match, meaning LWCF can only cover half the total project expenses.

Impact Radius

LWCF investments are considered to have a Tier 2 impact radius because they are resources for communities beyond the municipalities in which they are located. For example, a grant to the city of Burlington supported the development of the Oak Ledge accessible playground, one of the only fully accessible playgrounds in the state. As a unique resource for the state, it draws people with disabilities and who don't have disabilities from the wider Chittenden County area, as well as visitors to Burlington from elsewhere in the state.

Recreational Trails Program

The Recreational Trails Program (RTP) provides annual funding to Vermont communities for the development and restoration of public recreational trails.

RTP grants are federally funded on an annual basis through the United States Department of Transportation's Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) and are administered at the State level in Vermont through FPR. FPR makes RTP funds available to Vermont communities for the development and maintenance of public recreational trails, for both motorized and non-motorized recreation. Federal rules and requirements apply. In the 2026 grant round, FPR anticipates awarding approximately $500,000 to maintain and build trails across the state of Vermont.

All projects funded should help achieve the program's goal of developing and maintaining trails in proximity to all who live in and visit Vermont. Furthermore, all projects are required to help achieve the goals, objectives, and priorities found in Vermont's Statewide Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan (SCORP). Federal legislation mandates that RTP funds be allocated across three categories: 30% for non-motorized trail uses, 30% for motorized trail uses, and 40% for multi-use/diversified trail uses.

Applicant Eligibility

Who is eligible to apply for RTP grants:

- Municipalities (cities, towns, counties, etc.)
- Non-profit organizations
- State or Federal government agencies, other governmental entities (district or local authorities), or tribal governments

Project Eligibility

Eligible projects include:

- Maintenance/restoration of existing trails
- Construction of new trails, with certain limitations for projects on federal lands
- Development and rehabilitation of trailside and trailhead amenities, facilities, and parking areas (i.e., signage, kiosks, composting toilets, recycling receptacles, or trail structures along the trail, directly associated with the trail)
- Land Acquisitions: Acquisition of trail easements or fee simple title to property with trails or recreational trail corridors
- Educational projects

All projects must be successfully completed within the designated implementation period.

Reimbursement and Match Requirements

RTP is a reimbursement program, and grantees must be capable of financing the project and (after a grant agreement is fully executed) first paying for expenditures and then submitting a request to the State for reimbursement using the required documentation. Applicants must commit to a minimum 20% match (20% of the total estimated project cost).

Impact Radius

RTP grants are considered to have a Tier 2 impact radius. Although trails might lie entirely within one municipality, their benefits extend far beyond. For example, the Pine Hill Partnership RTP grant upgraded trails at Pine Hill, which is located within the City of Rutland. The trails benefit local residents, but also draw in regional and statewide visitors, especially since they open early in the season and offer a variety of terrain.

Vermont Recreational Trails Fund

The Vermont Recreational Trails Fund (VRTF) pursuant 10 V.S.A. § 446 comes from state gas tax money. 40% of the dollars are given to Vermont Association of Snow Travelers (VAST), 40% to FPR and 20% for community grants. FPR distributes this funding with the federal RTP program.

Impact Radius

VRTF grants have a Tier 2 impact radius. A VRTF grant to Kingdom Trails paid for the development of a new trail on Burke Town property that connects to the Kingdom Trail Association network. People come from all over Vermont, and the country, to use the Kingdom Trails network. This ripple effect positively benefits the local community.

Vermont Outdoor Recreation Economic Collaborative:

The Vermont Outdoor Recreation Community (VOREC) Grant Program was established in 2018 when the Vermont legislature passed Act 194. Grant funding can be used for a variety of purposes with the result being a community(ies) that can show measurable success supporting and growing their local economies through leveraging outdoor recreation.

The program is closely tied to the five pillars of the VOREC program which are to:

- Grow outdoor recreation-related businesses.
- Increase participation in outdoor recreation activities among all demographics.
- Strengthen the quality and extent of outdoor recreation resources.
- Increase stewardship of outdoor recreation resources and environmental quality.
- Promote and enjoy the health and wellness benefits of outdoor recreation.

Outdoor recreation is defined by VOREC and the community grant program as leisure, sport and therapeutic recreation activities pursued outdoors, mainly in a natural setting. Outdoor Recreation encompasses a wide scope of potential activities and the role of VOREC and the grant program is to elevate the knowledge base and potential of traditional and growing outdoor recreation activities.

Impact Radius

The impact radius of VOREC Community Grants was determined to be Tier 2. A VOREC Community Grant to Ascutney Outdoors paid for upgrades to the lift infrastructure at the mountain, as well as marketing materials and the connections from the mountain to the town. All of these upgrades benefit people in the town of Brownsville, but also visitors to the area, whether from adjacent towns or elsewhere in Vermont.

Excluded Initiatives

Several initiatives were reviewed but excluded from this report because they did not meet the Guidance's definition of direct investments or lacked readily available data. These include programs where FPR serves primarily as a land steward, regulator, or planning entity, as well as programs where funding decisions are made by external entities and FPR functions only as an administrator.

Although excluded, these initiatives continue to provide substantial environmental benefits to Vermonters and are central to the Department's mission.

Quantification of Benefits

The Environmental Justice Law mandates that agencies quantify environmental benefits associated with direct investments where feasible. At this time, the Department does not have consistent processes, metrics, or systems in place to quantify benefits across programs in a standardized manner. Developing such systems would require additional funding, staff capacity, and technical infrastructure.

Conclusion

This report identifies a defined set of direct investments through which the Department of Forests, Parks and Recreation delivers environmental benefits consistent with the Environmental Justice Law and the Environmental Benefits Spending Guidance. While these investments represent important and measurable funding streams, they reflect

only a portion of the Department's overall environmental contributions. The majority of FPR's work advances environmental protection, conservation, and public benefit through stewardship, regulatory oversight, long-term land management, planning, and sustained public access to natural resources, core governmental functions that are not structured as discrete, reportable investments and therefore fall outside the scope of this report.

The preparation of this report represents over 12 months of good-faith effort to interpret and apply the Guidance in a manner that is consistent, transparent, and methodologically sound. The Department undertook a comprehensive review of all programs, applied structured screening criteria, consulted internal expertise across divisions, and worked to extract relevant financial and geographic data from existing systems. In several instances, the Department went beyond the minimum requirements of the Guidance to ensure that potentially eligible programs were carefully evaluated and that reported investments were supported by defensible data.

At the same time, this process highlighted structural limitations in existing financial, data, and analytical systems. The Department does not currently maintain standardized tools or modeling frameworks capable of consistently quantifying environmental outcomes attributable to specific investments. Without uniform modeling methodologies, it is not possible to reliably quantify environmental benefits across programs in a way that ensures comparability and analytical integrity. Developing such modeling capacity, along with enhanced financial software, more consistent data collection practices, and dedicated analytical staff support, would require additional resources and sustained funding.

Despite these constraints, this report reflects a careful, transparent, and rigorous effort to identify and document direct investments within current capacity. It provides a foundational baseline upon which future refinements and system improvements may build, contingent upon available resources.

Appendix A. FPR Initially Omitted Initiatives

The following initiatives were omitted from the first report for a variety of reasons:

Initiative Name	Division	Program	Brief Program Description	Reason for Omission
Forest Legacy	Land Administration and Recreation	Conservation	Grants to help private landowners protect their forests for future generations while ensuring that their property rights are secure through land and easement purchases, project costs for Legacy and cost-share land acquisitions.	Project funding selected by the USDA Forest Service
State Urban Forest Resilience Grants	Forests	Urban and Community Forestry	Funds to support municipalities in growing and managing resilient urban forests through planning, planting, and maintenance.	One-time funding
Fruit and Nut Tree Grants	Forest	Urban and Community Forestry	Funds to support planting fruit and nut trees for community benefit.	Non-routine funding
Advanced Wood Heat	Forests	Forest Economy	Funding to support use of advanced wood heating for school, municipalities, and forest businesses.	Project funding selected by the USDA Forest Service