

Climate Action Input Session: Natural Lands and Forestry

Wednesday, November 13, 6-7:30pm

Summary of Input

*hosted by the Agriculture & Ecosystems Subcommittee
of the Vermont Climate Council*

Overview

The Vermont Climate Council is updating the state's Climate Action Plan. Subcommittees of the Council are holding a series of virtual public meetings to get input on their initial ideas for the update.

This document summarizes input during a session on November 13, 2024, focused on Vermont's natural lands and forestry. Approximately 40 people attended the 90-minute Zoom meeting. A participant list is included below.

This document is not a transcript of the session, but rather an overview of themes and ideas that participants provided verbally and in the chat. The summary also includes some comments that participants sent in after the meeting.

The session began with a presentation of emerging ideas from the Agriculture and Ecosystems Subcommittee related to natural lands and forestry.

- View presentation [slides](#).
- Watch the input session [recording](#).

Summary of input

High-level summary

At the end of the input session, participants were asked to answer the question, "what themes are jumping out?" Using a Menti link, they offered the short phrases as responses, which are grouped below.

Many comments focused on supporting land caretakers, including some specific policy proposals

- Need to better support land and water caretakers
- Use Value Appraisal (UVA) updating.

- Allow zero cut option for all forest owners in the UVA.
- Pay-For-Performance type program
- Managing and valuing forests and local forest products the same way we do agricultural lands
- Link co-benefits across sectors and our well being. Ecologically managed forests that support local wood systems that keep emissions down (less transport for the things we consume).
- Ensure that Vermonters can afford to own land
- Strong forest economy supports keeping forests as forests

Several comments spoke to management practices and land use planning

- Support climate smart forestry practices- including active management and the tools needed to keep it viable
- Management for old forest characteristics; think at the watershed scale
- Land use planning to reduce rural sprawl and better maintain large forest blocks
- Set aside substantial areas of wild forest
- Protect public forests
- Young managed forests sequester more carbon than old forests.

Commenters had different views about burning biomass to generate energy

- Stop burning wood
- Stop burning wood. Full stop.
- Bio fuel is vital part for forest stewardship and needs to be supported
- Use more wood for energy

Other comments

- Reaching town planners via RPCs
- Work on reduction, and do not put all climate solutions onto forest lands (public and private)

Detailed summary by theme

Below is a more detailed summary of input provided verbally during the conversation and in the chat, grouped by theme.

Aspects of the presentation that participants found particularly valuable

- The breadth of the recommendations
- The pathway “Manage natural and working lands and waters for biodiversity, forest health, water quality and climate resilience.” Vermont needs to be thinking about co-benefits and across systems.
- Protection of old growth forests
- Maintaining natural and working lands

Policies to support natural lands and forests

- The Use Value Appraisal program to be updated to make more lands eligible with a “no-cut” option.
- There are many laws on the books already that need capacity to implement them. Act 181 in particular needs adequate resources.

Impacts from biomass

- Harvesting for biomass has an impact on the land.
- Vermont should stop burning biomass to make electricity and other industrial scale burning. A moratorium should be considered. “What an outrageous waste of our forests in addition to the massive amount of carbon pollution, impact on biodiversity, flooding, human health. Thank you, thank you [for considering a moratorium].”

Land use planning

- Importance of watershed scale planning. Would like to see more of that in the document.
- Land use planning is an important tool to protect waters, forests and other important habitats.
- Information and advice needs to be transmitted down to the municipal level. As planning commissioners, we have limited views on how to engage with all those private landowners. How to have these conversations.
 - There are 14 Conservation Districts in Vermont which are considered watershed governments. They can provide assistance to land owners and managers to create conservation plans for their land

- Glad to see that a prioritization is being looked at for siting renewable energy on sites other than productive ag lands and forested areas. There is always a balance because it is all needed.
- [Comment sent in after the meeting] Act 250 continues to be very important and must remain strong. Because Act 250, Vermont still holds much of its defenses against climate warming (wetlands, forests, mountains, etc.) and we must not forget that fact...as difficult as it may be in the coming years, we must remain vigilant in the conservation of our forests, waters and lands. Our gem is Vermont, our best defense against climate warming is nature itself, and in the long run, our natural resources will be what is most valuable.
- [Comment sent in after the meeting] Help us ensure that outdoor recreation is appropriately integrated into the Vermont Conservation Strategy Initiative and leveraged as a tool to help achieve the goal of permanently conserving 30% of Vermont's landscape by 2030.

Key pressures on forests and the forest economy

- Invasive species are already here and will likely get worse. They are a major threat to biodiversity.
- Overpopulation of deer is hurting forest regrowth.
- This plan needs to be more focused on the pressures the industry faces.
- Forestry deserves and needs the same types of support that ag gets.

Balancing conservation with supporting the forestry economy

- The real issue in VT to keep forests viable is preventing them from turning into development. This requires us to keep every tool in the toolbox to support landowners to keep forest owning viable.
- 80% of forests are private, and 2/3 of those are individual owners. All of the individual decisions they make are really important.
- As a society, we need to consider that the wood growing here is doing a lot of good things, and as a society, we are using a lot of wood, and we need to balance those two. If we don't provide the wood, it will come from some other part of the world.
- Proforestation, sooner the better, and perhaps have 2 management systems - one for production and one for carbon capture. Eliminate clear cuts as forests warm now.

Pesticides

- What is the group doing about reducing use of pesticides? The great majority of people push chemicals to address invasives.

Subcommittee process for developing recommendations

- Please post on the website the working documents that show draft prioritized actions and other materials
- Help us understand the moments when we can/should provide written comment

Emissions

- Want to see more about reducing demand and reducing emissions

Other

- Not seeing where these recommendations recognize the cooling benefits of green cover

Participants

Seth Clifford, Peg Merrens, Evan Horne, Billy Coster, Dave Wilcox, Stuart Blood, Sam Lincoln Ryan Patch, Marli Rupe, Edward Barber, Julie Evans, Nathanael Johns, Gabe Russo, Dana Doran Christine McGowan, Jaiel Pulskamp, Walter Poleman, Virginia Clarke, Tony D'Amato, Ashley Adams, Sadie Brown, Cheryl Joy Lipton, Ed Larson, Elizabeth Lesnikoski, Curt Lindberg, Ken Gagnon, Zack Porter, Steve Parren, Sarah Christopherson, Stephen Leslie, Aamore Richards Margo Ghia, Henry Swayze, Andrew Milliken, Al Freeman, Kate Forrer, Li Shen, Daniel Koenemann, David Plumb (facilitator)