



Vermont Wetlands Program Plan:

Strengthening Core Elements of a Comprehensive Wetlands Program In Vermont

2011-2015

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Vermont Wetlands Program Plan

The Vermont Wetland Program Plan (“the Plan”) provides a framework and direction over the next five years for the Vermont Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC) and its partners to strengthen and improve the state’s Wetland Program to better protect wetlands and aquatic resources statewide. The Plan should be considered a work in progress that will be revisited and revised as needed.

Overview:

The main objective of this plan is to build and refine the core elements of the Vermont Wetlands Program. A bill passed by the Vermont Legislature and signed by the governor in May 2009 paved the way for **revised Wetland Rules**. The new rules are now in effect (September 15, 2010.) These changes will require a major outreach and education effort to inform the public of revisions that have been made **to Vermont’s Wetland Rules**; and bolster our efforts to educate the public of the benefits of wetlands in general.

In preparation for the **National Wetland Condition Assessment** in 2011, Vermont’s Wetland Program has refined and strengthened its **wetland monitoring and assessment protocols**. The state is also working to better integrate wetlands with other programs and to use the wetland monitoring and assessment data gathered thus far. Related efforts include revisions to the Vermont’s Water Quality Monitoring Strategy which can be found at http://www.anr.state.vt.us/dec//waterq/wqd_mgtplan/waterqmstrat.htm and the Statewide Surface Water Management Strategy which can be found at <http://www.anr.state.vt.us/dec/waterq/swms.html>. Also the **VT Water Quality Standards** and the **Anti-degradation Policy** are being revised. The federal Farm Bill provides Vermont with the continued opportunity to work with partners to increase the number of restored wetlands. The Center for Clean and Clear is now the **Ecological Restoration Program** within the Water Quality Division, and the Wetlands Program will again take the lead in coordinating **wetland restoration and conservation** efforts. This

long term plan builds directly off Vermont's current EPA-approved Wetlands Program work plan which addresses these core elements.

Wetlands Program Mission and Goals:

Working within the Mission of the Agency of Natural Resources and the Department of Conservation, and under the Agency's guiding principles and comprehensive goals, the Mission of the Wetlands Program within the Water Quality Division is:

"To identify, inventory, monitor, assess and protect wetlands that provide significant functions and values; to encourage the restoration and enhancement of degraded wetlands; to provide the citizens of Vermont with information and assistance to allow them to be fully informed of wetland functions and values; and to encourage sound wetland stewardship."

The Goals are:

- To manage the program effectively and efficiently to protect Vermont's significant wetlands;
- To achieve no net loss of wetland functions and values;
- To identify and map all significant wetlands;
- To monitor and assess wetlands at the watershed scale, the landscape scale, and individually (Level 1, 2, and 3); and to use the resulting data to inform regulatory decisions and guide restoration projects;
- To provide a sustained level of outreach and education to the public, targeted consultants, as well as other governmental agencies, regarding the values and functions of wetlands and the programs designed to manage and protect them;
- To promote sound wetland stewardship on both public and private lands; and

- To provide professional development opportunities to the Wetlands Program staff on a continuing and equitable basis.

The Wetlands Program achieves its goals by working within the framework of the Vermont Wetlands Rules and with partner agencies, including: the Departments of Fish and Wildlife, Environmental Conservation, and Forests, Parks and Recreation; the Natural Resources Board and the Act 250 Land Use Permit program; the US Environmental Protection Agency; the US Army Corps of Engineers, the Natural Resources Conservation Service, and the Green Mountain National Forest.

Core Elements of the Vermont Wetlands Program Plan

The four core elements of a wetland program that have been identified by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency as part of their Enhancing State and Tribal Wetlands Program (ESTP) Initiative, have been used to organize this plan. The tables that follow list goals, objectives and activities under each element and reflect the work needed in the coming years to meet the goals. Detailed annual work plans will be developed to reflect available staffing resources from year to year.

The four core elements are:

1. Monitoring and Assessment
2. Regulatory
3. Voluntary Restoration and Protection
4. Water Quality Standards for Wetlands

CORE ELEMENT #1: MONITORING AND ASSESSMENT

Goal: *To protect and improve the function and condition of Vermont's significant wetlands such that important ecosystem services, including flood attenuation, ground and surface water quality protection, wildlife habitat, etc., are preserved and maintained to benefit Vermont citizens.*

Objective: *Monitor and assess wetlands at the watershed, landscape, and site level scales consistent with EPA's 3 – Level Approach (see Elements of a State Water Monitoring and Assessment Program for Wetlands, April 2001)*

Action (a): Field Monitoring and Assessing of Vermont Wetlands					
Activity	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015
Participate in the National Wetlands Condition Assessment (NWCA); field sampling of 8 sites	X				
Establish criteria for selecting long-term monitoring sites.	X	X			
Establish Long-term monitoring sites; monitor and assess		X	X	X	X
Rotational Basin Wetlands Assessment; select and assess 20 to 25 wetlands Per year as part of basin assessment		X	X	X	X

Re-fine and calibrate VT Rapid Assessment Method (VRAM)	X	X	X	X	X
Revise approved (2009) Quality Assurance Project Plan as needed.	X	X	X	X	X
Obtain landowner permission	X	X	X	X	X
Conduct sampling and assessments	X	X	X	X	X
Compile and analyze data	X	X	X	X	X
Complete final report to be included in the Integrated 305(b)/303(d) Report [see Action (b)]		X		X	

Action (b) Integrate the Wetlands Monitoring & Assessment activities with the traditional Water Quality Division monitoring and assessment projects (wadeable streams, lakes and ponds.)					
Activity	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015
Revise Vermont's Water Quality Monitoring Strategy to include	X		X		X

updated information on the wetland monitoring and assessment activities					
New or revised sampling design and methods will be decided upon with staff from the Water Quality Division and experience with the NWCA		X	X	X	X
Refine VT RAM as a tool to help define Tier 2.5 type wetlands in the Water Quality Standards (also below)	X	X	X	X	X

CORE ELEMENT #2: REGULATORY

Goal: *To manage the program effectively and efficiently to protect Vermont's significant wetlands and to achieve no net loss of wetland functions and values*

Objective: *Make necessary changes in the Wetland Program to reflect both the new Wetland Rules and the resources available. Ensure the program protects significant wetlands with no net loss of acreage or function.*

Action (a) Adopt regulations and rules to reflect statutes					
Activity	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015
Revise application form and guidance	X	X	X		
Identify and map significant wetlands (also below)	X	X	X	X	X
Finalize draft wetlands general permit for public review and comment.	X				
Continue development and refinement of Functions and Values Checklist	X	X	X	X	X
Continue development and refinement of Vermont Rapid Assessment Method (VRAM) checklist – latest version ready for 2011 field season	X	X	X	X	X
Develop a system or process to ensure regular compliance monitoring of permit conditions and restoration projects			X	X	X

Action (b): Perform public education and outreach about wetland protection and regulations					
Activity	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015
Develop new guidance for the general public based on the new Wetland rules, reflecting changes in state regulation; and also regarding wetlands in general (their value, importance, and identification)	x	x			
Revise handouts, pamphlets for the general public	x	X	x		
Provide ongoing guidance for consultants and the regulated community on the application and review procedures to conform to the new rules	x	x	x	x	x
Hold workshop for consultants and the regulated community as needed	x	x	x	x	x
Hold a series of regional workshops for interested towns on the new rules	x	x			
Create a public information blitz regarding wetland regulations for Vermont including Public Service Announcements		x			
Update website	x	x	x	x	x

Provide clear ongoing guidance to public on how to identify jurisdictional wetlands and activities: site visits, workshops and written materials as noted above.

x

x

x

x

X

Action (c): Work cooperatively with federal partners for a unified regulatory approach					
Activity	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015
In-lieu fee Interagency Review team Participation for project approval and site selection	x	x	x	x	x
Evaluate effectiveness of In-Lieu fee program			x	x	x
Participate in the VT General Permit Discussion for 2012 renewal, include changes that reflect the anti-degradation policy		x			
Action (d): Improve wetland mapping for Vermont					
Activity	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015
Develop standards and methodology for adding to and revising VSWI maps	x				
Develop a means for the public to electronically submit wetland delineation information to improve VSWI maps		x	x	x	x
Integrate permit information into mapping		x	x		
Update VSWI maps based on project reviews, site visits, desktop reviews, and submittal of information from the public	x	x	x	x	x

CORE ELEMENT #3: VOLUNTARY RESTORATION AND PROTECTION

Goal: *Increase wetland acreage through restoration and promote sound wetland stewardship on both public and private lands*

Objective: *Establish consistent and compatible goals across relevant agencies and establish partnerships to leverage additional restoration and protection*

Action (a): Interagency Coordination					
Activity	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015
Convene meeting of partners and hold quarterly coordination meetings to coordinate restoration efforts	X	x	x	x	X
Project identification: working with rivers program, watershed planners, and federal partners, identify opportunities for voluntary restoration	X	X	X	X	X
Develop a wetland restoration funding directory of local, state, federal and private funding		X	X	X	X

Action (b): Outreach and technical assistance for restoration projects					
Activity	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015
Wetland program staff provide outreach and technical assistance for restoration projects	x	x	x	x	X
Action (c): Monitoring for success of voluntary restoration					
Activity	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015
Develop indicators of success checklist		X			
Use monitoring and assessment protocol and indicators at selected sites			X	X	X

CORE ELEMENT #4: WATER QUALITY STANDARDS FOR WETLANDS

Goal: *Understand and address the relationship between wetlands and the Vermont Water Quality Standards*

Objective: *Ensure that wetlands are treated as waters within state water quality programs.*

Action (a): Establish the relationship between wetlands and Water Quality Standards					
Activity	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015
Review existing information to help establish the relationship between wetlands and 1) water quality standards, 2) “waters of the state” and, 3) anti-degradation policies	X				
Continue participation in Water Quality Division anti-degradation policy development workgroup	X	X			
Provide a framework for addressing wetlands in the new anti-degradation policy	X	X			
Continue discussion with the Natural Resources Board Water Panel and Water Quality Division staff on the need to address wetlands in the Vermont Water Quality Standards	X	X		X	X

Action (b): Effectively Use 401 Certifications in the context of 404 projects		
Develop internal Sec. 401 guidance in terms of process and policy	X	X
Work with other Programs in the Water Quality Division to fill gaps in the 401 review	X	X
Develop a more transparent application process for a 401 WQ Cert that includes information required for the Anti-deg procedure	X	X

Notes: