

Vermont forest strategies: New resource helps towns protect woods, local economies

By Kathy Doyle

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An important resource is now available to help local planners and decision-makers keep Vermont's forests and wildlife habitat intact. The newly-released guide "Community Strategies for Vermont's Forests and Wildlife: A Guide for Local Action" is made available by the Vermont Natural Resources Council (VNRC) in collaboration with many other organizations.

"This publication is the result of many years of work with local communities throughout Vermont to help them be proactive in conserving forest land, keeping wildlife habitat intact and determining how growth will occur," says Jamey Fidel, general counsel and forest and wildlife program director at VNRC.

Fidel explains that the guide offers strategies to help communities plan for the future and protect the countless benefits of the state's forests and wildlife, such as recreation access, water quality protection and storing carbon.

Forests help mitigate climate change — an issue many Vermont communities are struggling with. "The Governor's Commission on Climate Change found that the most cost-effective strategy was to keep forests intact so they continue to have the ability to sequester and store carbon," Fidel says.

The importance of forests to Vermont's rural economy is often overlooked. Steve Sinclair, director of forests with the Vermont Department of Forests, Parks and Recreation and contributor to the project, points out that forests provide economic value to landowners and those employed in the forest sector — loggers, truckers and consulting foresters. And forests provide important ecological functions, including water retention.

"Tropical Storm Irene was not as bad as it could have been, because forests act like sponges," Sinclair notes.

Incremental subdivision happening throughout the state is making forests more fragmented. Studies conducted by VNRC indicate that the average size of forested parcels in Vermont has been shrinking over the last 25 years, a dramatic trend that is largely attributed to patterns of rural residential development.

"Small subdivisions happen a little at a time," says Kate McCarthy, sustainable communities program director at VNRC and coauthor of the guide. "We are not saying that growth should not happen, but how to plan appropriately for it."

The fragmentation of forests can negatively affect plant and animal species, wildlife habitat, water quality and the viability of the rural economy. Sinclair explains that the Agency of Natural Resources wants to do “what it can to keep forests from being converted to other uses or split into smaller units that compromise the management or benefit” of the forest.

VNRC is sending the guide to planning commissions and conservation commissions across the state, since most rural development is managed at the local level. A VNRC study concluded that Act 250, the state’s land use law, reviews a very small percentage of subdivisions and residential development in Vermont.

“The majority of rural development is influenced by local decision makers,” explains Fidel.

Jens Hilke, conservation planning biologist with the Department Fish and Wildlife and a contributor to the guide, notes that the regulatory and non-regulatory strategies described in the guide will “provide technical assistance to help towns do what they say they want to do.”

Although town plans identify wildlife habitat and forests as important conservation priorities, Hilke notes that few towns protect forests and wildlife in a regulatory way, through zoning and subdivision regulations. Significant efforts are underway, however.

Hilke says that the towns of Brandon and Marlborough are “anxious for the guide” to help them establish overlay districts and zoning regulations that will protect habitat connectivity. Hilke notes, “Some towns feel regulatory tools are inappropriate or not politically feasible; for other towns, that is the first approach they will go for.” He adds, “With regulatory tools, it is easier to quantify the effects that they will have.”

McCarthy points out that the guide offers specific guidance. “We are proud of the real detail to help volunteer boards write standards and complete applications,” she says. “We encourage towns to pick the strategies that work for them. There is not a ‘one-size-fits-all’ approach.”

For instance, if a town has no forest district and wants one, the guide provides the necessary detail to help volunteer boards write standards. And if a town has no zoning regulations, McCarthy suggests that planners can start the conversation about natural resources by getting people together to find out what is important and why. A town might also focus on other non-regulatory strategies, such as increasing lands in the current use program or offering workshops on estate planning to help keep forest lands intact.

As to the challenges that local planners might encounter when attempting to implement the strategies identified in the guide, McCarthy emphasizes that good planning takes time. That means that effective planning must be both a collaborative process at the local level and a long-term activity. Turnover in local planning commissions, conservation groups and select boards can present challenges.

Another hurdle is the apprehension in communities that allocating resources to protect forests and wildlife might somehow impair the local economy. “We understand that many communities are looking at promoting the economic viability of their towns,” says Fidel. “We hope the guide will be seen as a way to help maintain the rural economy. Ecosystem services are so important to the local economy.”

McCarthy agrees. “This issue is an umbrella issue — healthy forests sustain transportation infrastructure, provide flood protection and improve quality of life.”

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SIDEBAR

Forest Protection Resources:

"Community Strategies for Vermont's Forests and Wildlife.

A guide for local action, published by the Vermont Natural Resources Council: vnrc.org/programs/forests-wildlife/guide/.

"Conserving Vermont's Natural Heritage"

A guide to community-based planning published by the Vermont Fish and Wildlife Department and the Agency of Natural Resources.

A map and more

A biofinder map and database of Vermont's lands and waters supporting high priority ecosystems, natural communities, habitats and species, developed by the Agency of Natural Resources and partners: biofinder.vermont.gov/.



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