

Windham County, VT 2023 Local Work Group Report



Date: April 14th, 2023

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What is a Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS) local workgroup?

A NRCS local work group (LWG) convened and discussed here serves as an advisory committee to the Vermont NRCS State Technical Committee, providing recommendations to USDA on local natural resource priorities for conservation activities, identifying program funding needs and recommending program application criteria in Windham County. The district also uses the results of this NRCS workgroup and the locally-led conservation process to inform the district's work and the work of other regional partners. Local work groups in Vermont are organized by Natural Resources Conservation District Boundaries. The local workgroups generally meet once a year. This report is a summary of the results and recommendations of our Windham County VT local workgroup.

Overview of the Windham County NRCD Locally Led Conservation Planning Process and Local WorkGroup 2023 Meeting

Based on a review of the LWG, done by the Windham County Natural Resources Conservation District (NRCD), the Windham County Local Work Group highlighted these recommendations of notable significance. The top resource concerns are Wildlife, Invasive Species and Ground Water Quality. The top concerns that should be addressed this year are rural forest health, pollinator habitat, soil health, invasive species and climate change resiliency.

The Windham County Natural Resources Conservation District (WCNRCD) offered a 15 question Conservation Resource Survey that was shared with partners and the public who were invited to provide feedback on local conservation needs which would be considered in regional planning and program delivery. We hosted our 2023 Locally Led Conservation meeting on April 14th 2023 over Zoom from 10:00am-12:00pm. This was preceded by a "Conservation Coffee Chat" held in conjunction with NRCS at Brooks Memorial Library in Brattleboro, VT on March 30th. District and NRCS staff presented information about the locally-led process and recruited producer and public participation in both the resource concern survey and the local working group at this meeting.

The meeting agenda started with a land acknowledgement. We want to respectfully acknowledge the traditional, ancestral, unceded territory of the Abenaki People, who have stewarded this land throughout the generations. After introductions, Marie Caduto who serves as Watershed Coordinator for all of Windham County's watersheds with the Department of Environmental Conservation gave an overview of both basin plans that

apply to Windham County.. The workgroup then reviewed the results of the conservation resources survey and discussed highlighted public concerns. The group also discussed additional resource concerns identified through the considerable expertise and experience of the partners and producers in attendance. Phyllicia Moore, South Zone District Conservationist with the Natural Resources Conservation Service provided a review of Windham County's previous year's local fund pool proposal (submitted in June of 2022).. **The local work group then decided they wished to move forward with a 2023 Local Fund Pool Proposal.** The process of designing the 2023 local fund pool proposal was initiated during this initial meeting and completed via an additional meeting held via zoom on May 12th 2023.

The complete minutes from the local working group meeting held on April 14th are included below, along with the results of the conservation resource concern survey that was made available to the public in advance of the local working group meeting. Highlights of the working group's discussion of survey results and additional concerns include the following concerns related to agriculture and conservation:

- The impact of climate change on animal movement patterns.
- A lack of available water when and where it is needed.
- Increasing risk of losing keystone species across the landscape.
- Invasive plants and pests.
- Increasing age of the county's farmer population.
- Access to equipment, especially for conservation-friendly practices like no or reduced tillage.

The local working group made the following recommendation to address the above concerns:

- An effort is needed to establish better corridors to support biodiversity in the county and at the regional scale.
- More resources should be invested in exploring the use of terraced farming to help keep water where it's needed when it's needed.
- Conservation practice should help connect producers with keystone species retention efforts to make them allies for conservation on the landscape.
- More funding programs are needed to help producers access needed equipment with fewer logistical hurdles.
- More technical assistance is needed for producers, particularly young farmers to help them navigate a changing landscape. Partnerships between academic institutions and conservation partners are encouraged.
- Proactive efforts are needed at the landscape scale to address growing threats from invasive plants and pests. The scale of this issue is much larger than current programming can effectively tackle.

Minutes

Windham County Local Work Group
Virtual Meeting April 14th 2023
10:00am -12:00pm

Present: Heather Blunk, Isabel Bowman, Cory Ross: Windham NRCD Staff; Linda Corse: Windham NRCD Board Chair and Organic Dairy Farmer; Marie Caduto: Vermont DEC; Rich Holshuh: Abenaki Tribal Historic Preservation Officer, Atowi Project; Phyllicxia Moore: NRCS; Serene (they/them): Giant Journey Farm in Newfane; David Erickson: Brattleboro resident, runs digital photography and education business, has worked in conservation and sustainability.

Welcome

Introductions: Name, organization & What is your favorite zero-waste swap?

Overview Of Basin Plans – Marie Caduto:

Goal of the basin plan is to take all of the water quality information we have on the basin and figure out what that tells us and what our next steps are for improving water quality conditions, aquatic habitat conditions, etc. Two basins makeup Windham County: Williams, Saxtons and West River (Basin 11) and Deerfield River (Basin 12). Deerfield is a bi-state watershed. What are the issues/where are the problem that we could be addressing further as far as buffers, wetlands impacts etc: Only one ag-impaired water in the Southeast Region of VT (Newton Brook in Vernon). Several other areas are ag impacted: Williams and Saxtons Rivers are stressed for several factors relating to agriculture.

Question: is there an effort by VT to acquire watershed protection areas (land purchases)? Yes, the state does try to do this if they can find an organization to work with. Can also use conservation easements for this purpose. Vermont River Conservancy is willing to do small parcels, which can protect resources like river shore or wetland.

Review of 2023 Conservation Resource Survey results 41 respondents to this year's survey.

Of folks who used the land professionally, most were among those who had worked the land for more than 25 years.

Top three land uses respondents concerned about:

1. Streams and rivers (tied)
2. Forests
3. Wetlands

Top Resource Concerns:

1. Wildlife
2. Invasive Species and Ground Water Quality (tied)

Top Concerns we Should Address this Year:

1. Rural Forest Health
2. Pollinator Habitat
3. Soil Health, Invasive Species, Climate Change Resiliency

Which NRCS Practices do you envision needing this year:

1. Trails and walkways
2. Wildlife Habitat Planting
3. Cover Crops

New and Emerging Concerns:

1. Jumping Worms
2. Run-off from solar arrays
3. Affordable land
4. Climate migration
5. List not exhaustive (see final report)

Discussion & reflection on results LWG member concerns:

1. Climate change/shifts in weather patterns will produce changes in wildlife patterns. Need to look at biodiversity corridors. Major roadways bisect our biodiversity and limit the ability of wildlife to respond to changing climate conditions. Need to establish better corridors.

2. Lack of water (how can we manage the landscape better to keep water where we want it to be vs. running off) This is a problem that is likely to increase in coming years.

a. Should look at which practices will encourage keystone species retention and work with producers to make them allies with vulnerable species.

3. Invasive plants: are we thinking about invasive and non-native insects, particularly farm pests. I.e: Spotted Lanternfly. Can we be proactive about anticipated threats?

a. Integrated pest management is an NRCS-funded practice, but we could possibly implement this more than we are currently doing.

4. Terraced Farming – would it be an effective practice in Vermont? Could NRCS-VT add this in the future? Would keep water from running off the landscape.

a. This conversation is happening among resource staff at VT-NRCS. Phyllicia encourages us to include this in our report to the State Technical Committee. If there are sites we have in mind for resource staff to visit they would be open to making these visits and being able to look at different sites over time to evaluate practices before implementation. The timeline for collecting the data for a new practice is over a couple of years, so the sooner we start doing the work on a new practice, the sooner the practice might be implemented.

b. No-till is an important solution to many issues, particularly soil health and water quality.

c. What can we do to help producers to get away from marketplace pressures to use older, less-sustainable practices?

d. There may be a mismatch between the current marketplace of tools and the practices we want to see implemented in the future. For example, a farmer may still be paying off a tractor that can't be used in terraced farming. Need something to bridge the gap.

e. CIG and other funding opportunities (Notice of fundings) from NRCS can support shared equipment purchases, while EQIP cannot. UVM-Extension does some of this with shared equipment purchases. New fundings were released this month – check grants.gov

f. Equipment rentals are available from the Connecticut River Watershed Farmers Alliance and Cheshire Conservation District.

g. Wetland restoration work in the ag landscape could make a huge difference both for water quality and habitat quality and Nitrogen reduction.

h. Need help getting young people into farming. Smaller scale farming is more doable for young farmers.

i. NRCS has an urban and community scale fund pool.

j. There is a major need for slaughterhouses.

k. Silvopasture – funding is needed to convert forests into silva pastures. Producers want expert advice on which trees to cull.

l. What are current linkages with accredited educational institutions in our county and state to provide more technical and skill-based training for new agricultural professionals.

m. How are we engaging with educational institutions to meet changing needs? Need communication linkages and a marketplace of ideas. Could we engage with the Community College of Vermont in Brattleboro?

n. Could the district create a database of opportunities for students to be involved on farms (seasonal or part time help)?

o. Producers need help navigating the ever growing list of funding programs.

Review of last year's Local Fund Pool Proposal

1. A local fund pool can provide funding for key areas of emphasis to support applications that might not be funded through the statewide EQIP model.

2. A fund pool proposal needs to follow the results of the locally led process and the tactical basin plan(s).

3. NRCS provides a format for this application process.

4. We prepared a proposal for the full south zone in FY22 that was not funded. This was due to the proposal being too broad in its scope. A combined proposal with multiple districts could still work but practices and concerns would need to align.

5. FY23 fund pool proposal: Last year's focus was on invasive plants. Selected practices included herbaceous weed control, forest pest pressure, but also some practice relating to forest health and aquatic habitat quality. The proposal was for \$150,000. The amount was based on the amount of applications on the books that had not been funded in Windham County.

Vote on creation of Local Fund Pool Proposal for this year

The Local Working Group voted unanimously to establish a local fund pool proposal for FY24.

Forests, streams and rivers, wetlands were the top three land use types in the survey.

Top Resource concerns: wildlife, invasive species, groundwater,

1. Terrestrial Habitat
2. Invasive Species
3. Source Water Depletion
4. Soil Quality Limitations
5. Aquatic Habitat

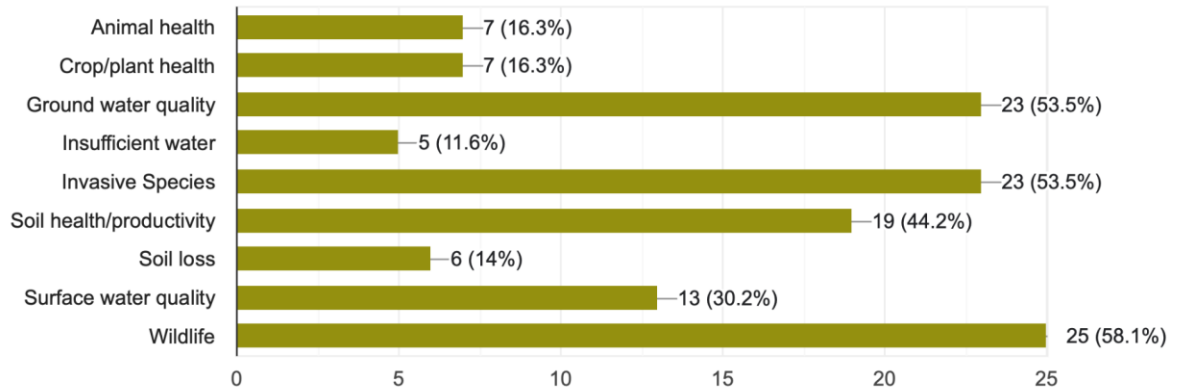
Decided to have a following meeting to finalize Local Fund Pool Proposal.

The following information is the results of the Windham County LWG engagement efforts.

Survey Results

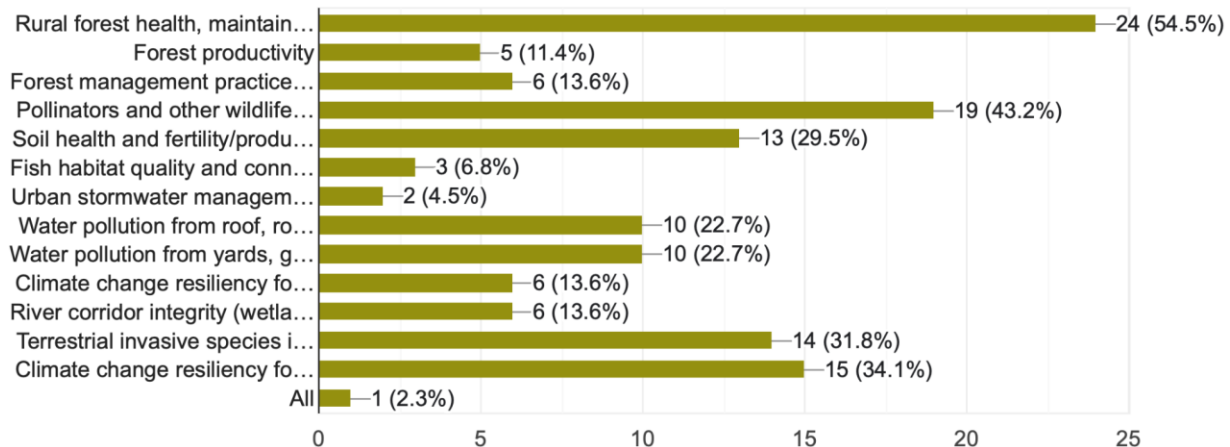
What resource issues concern you the most?

43 responses



Please identify your top 3 natural resource concerns or areas of interest you'd like the District to focus on addressing.

44 responses



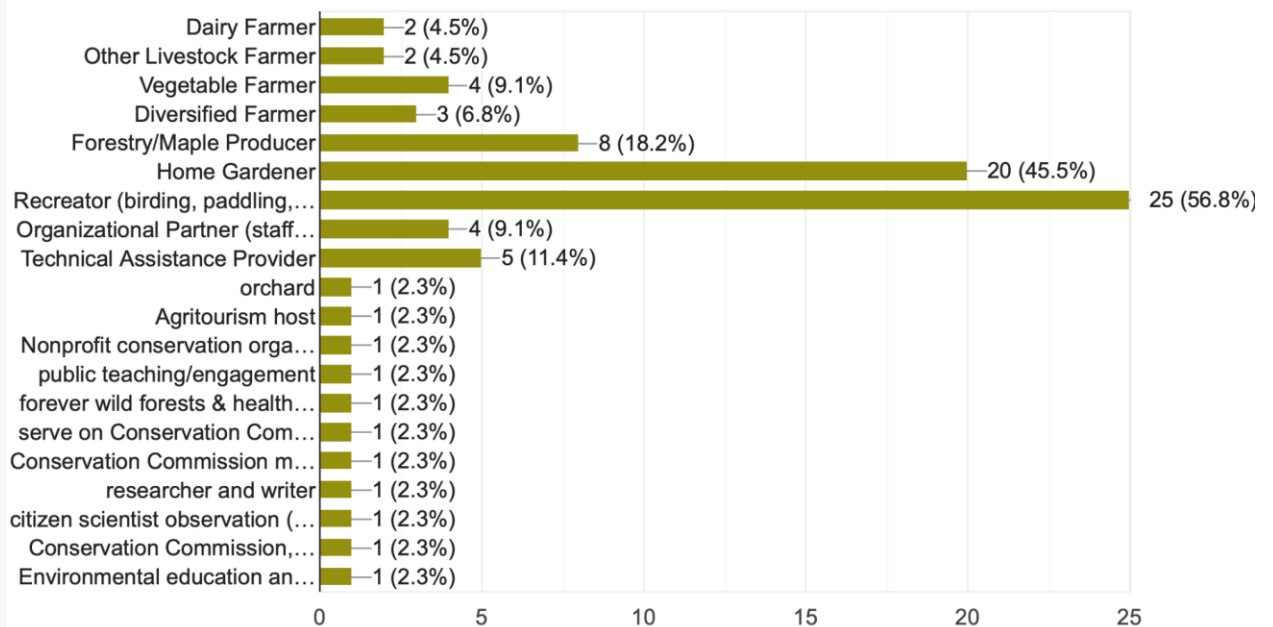
Are there any new or emerging trends in natural resources that we should be aware of and develop services for?

- Climate migration: people, flora and fauna
- habitat connectivity for amphibian migrations
- science based land ethics, new old growth forest management and aging of land owners
- Maintaining wildlife corridors
- Runoff from solar arrays
- urine recycling

- user pressure on public lands
- Solar arrays on farmland. Loss of agricultural lands as farms go out of business.
- Asia jumping worm
- Affordable farm land for young and new farmers.
- Food safety and resiliency
- What I see in Windham County is wetland degradation by agriculture. And I believe we need to educate homeowners on the sterile nature of lawns and ornamental plantings instead of native species.
- genetic variability
- Preventing habitat destruction to add affordable housing: should more compact housing solutions be promoted in rural areas?
- excessive rainfall due to climate change = more erosion, more need for sustainable drainage systems
- Any participation you can have in the support of young professionals into fields that currently have an aging population which includes dairy farms, logging, forestry consulting etc

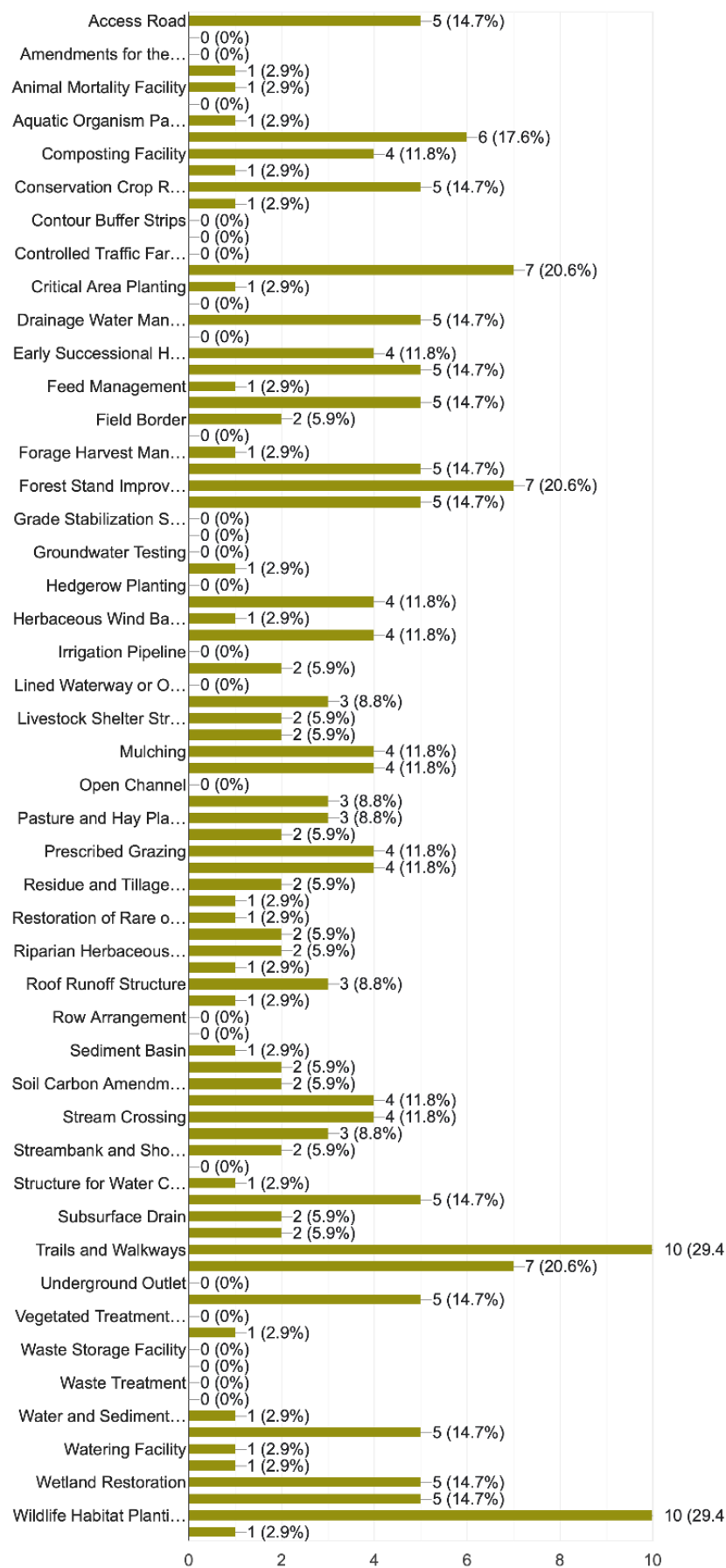
How do you use land in Windham County

44 responses



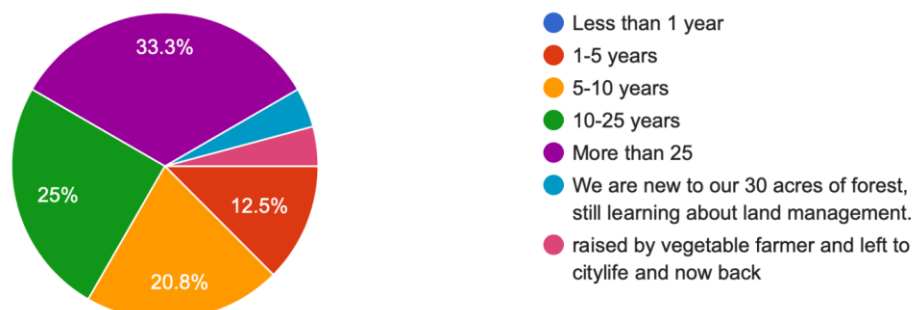
If you're familiar with NRCS practices, which of the following practices do you need or anticipate you will need on land you manage or provide assistance for next year?

34 responses



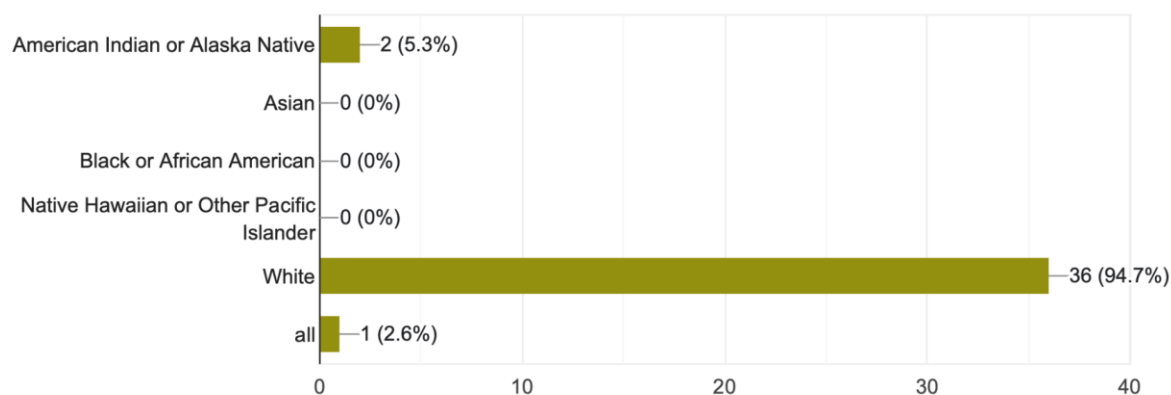
If you answered any type of Farming or Forestry in the question above, how long have you been on the land in that way:

24 responses



Do you identify with any of the following demographics?

38 responses



Which age bracket do you fall into?

44 responses

