

# Watershed Groups Take Action to Protect and Build Vermont Communities

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HIGH MEADOWS  
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## Vermont's Watersheds Face Risks from Extreme Weather, Pollution, and Erosion

Vermont communities increasingly suffer from major weather events, flooding, water pollution, and erosion of our rivers. These disturbances put Vermonters at risk and mean that there has never been a more urgent time to protect Vermont's watersheds. A watershed includes all the land that drains rainwater and snow into the same streams, rivers, lakes and wetlands. Healthy watersheds are critical for clean drinking water, agriculture, recreation, habitat for plants and animals and our own health and safety.

In 2015 the High Meadows Fund (HMF) launched an initiative to support Vermont communities in building storm impact resilience in the wake of Tropical Storm Irene. Between 2015 and 2019, HMF funded projects led by Regional Planning Commissions, Natural Resources Conservation Districts, and watershed groups, all of which supported planning and resilience building at a watershed scale. HMF prioritized projects that demonstrated a strong commitment to engaging diverse partnerships, fostering a watershed approach beyond one town, and investing time in a steering committee and inclusive community engagement.

## Watershed Groups: At the Heart of Protecting our Communities

Watershed groups are on the front lines of working with communities, local and government officials, and many others to protect Vermonters and promote healthy watersheds. These groups are tasked with developing and implementing concrete solutions that respond to weather events, pollution, and erosion of land along their waterway. Often, watershed groups span across several towns, and are challenged to bring a watershed approach to local land use decisions.

After four years of work across ten of Vermont's watersheds, HMF's watershed resilience partners have learned some valuable lessons about how communities can become a part of land use decision-making and planning. While each watershed is unique, there are still some successful strategies and actions that can work across Vermont. By sharing these best practices, watershed groups and HMF hope to provide learning for others working on these issues, and demonstrate the importance of this work.



"It's a **complex problem**, so there's probably no simple solution. There needs to be a cooperative effort from everybody: the towns, the highway departments, agriculture, the State, private landowners big or small. It's going to have to be a **cooperative effort**."

*-Keith Mason, Pawlet Highway Foreman*

# Four Valuable Lessons For Planning and Organizing as a Watershed

## 1 Form a diverse steering committee.

Forming a group of stakeholders, representing communities across the watershed, is an important process in building collaboration, leadership and engagement on watershed issues. Often called a steering committee, this group shares a common identity that relates to their local lake or river. The steering committee meets regularly, prioritizes projects, and builds credibility with other stakeholders such as funders, town officials, and landowners.

## 2 How we say things is important.

Language and messages must mean something to those we are trying to reach. It is helpful to use locally common terms, avoid jargon, and find credible messengers who have good relationships with local communities and know what they are talking about. In many cases, building community around a watershed doesn't have to start with talking about erosion or climate change—it starts with listening and making people feel welcome.

## 3 Taking concrete action builds trust.

When watershed organizations act by implementing projects, they build trust. People see the impact of an event or a project through a public tour or by taking part in a community volunteer activity like planting trees for a riparian buffer. These activities create buy-in a lot faster than standalone community meetings, and paint a clearer picture of what watershed solutions look like.

## 4 Resilience is built on community relationships.

Mobilizing people to identify common problems and build solutions is a core part of the work of watershed organizations. Building a watershed community starts with individual relationships, including connections with people beyond the usual suspects. Go to places where people already spend time, like a school or library. Engage people who deal with infrastructure issues, like road crews. Be creative with hands-on experiences like tree plantings and communal meals to get people involved.



## A CALL TO ACTION

### What's next for Vermont's Watersheds?

The work of watershed organizations is important and time consuming. Without outreach and education at the local level, we don't reach good decisions that protect our communities from the next storm. Clean water, safe roads and bridges, reducing flooding impacts, and

intact wildlife habitats require coordination, planning and outreach at the watershed scale. We encourage the legislature and administration to include support for watershed level planning and engagement in the work supported by the Clean Water Fund.