



Conservation Commission

Minutes DRAFT Dated 01-07-24 (A Marshall-Carney)

Special Meeting of January 30, 2024

Present: Meg Baldor, Marcy Blauvelt, Malachi Brennan, Marty Johansen, Amy Marshall-Carney, Billy Vigdor

Public: None

- **Agenda Review and Modifications**

No changes to the original agenda.

- **Public Comment**

No opening comments. Throughout the meeting the WCC members solicited and appreciated feedback from both Josh and Laura.

- **Comments to the Worcester Range Management United Draft Plan**

Meg and Marcy presented their findings after thoroughly reviewing the Worcester Range Management Unit Draft Plan and subsequent supporting documentation. They also presented a draft set of comments for the Commission to revise (Draft Comments).

The discussion highlighted observations and concerns within the WCC's purview and mission. Discussion points included: consequences of human actions within natural conservation areas; unsanctioned trail development for mountain biking and backcountry skiing purposes; the trend toward incremental and unmanaged recreation trail growth; and the impact of logging within the WRMU. There was also a discussion of the anecdotal evidence regarding the effect of increased tourism and the corresponding growth of recreation on forest resources that is compromising local, state, regional and international conservation efforts. After the discussion and review of the Draft Comments, the Commission voted unanimously to authorize Marcy, Meg, Malachi, and Amy to revise Draft Comments consistent with the direction provided by the Commission during the meeting. The Due date for the final Comments were 2/2/24.

The final WCC comments are attached hereto.

- **Next regularly scheduled WCC meeting - February 13, 2024**

WCC unanimously decided to cancel the 2/13/24 meeting.

- **Action Items**

Billy to confirm with Tom Leitz (Town Manager) the balance and use conditions of the Town's Conservation Fund (Action Item assigned 1/9/24 WCC meeting).

- **Upcoming Agenda Topics**
 - WCC Bylaws Sub-Committee Update - Marty
 - Conservation Data Sub-Committee update – Amy, Marcy, Marty
 - 2024 Invasive species scope of work discussion – TBD.

- **Adjournment**
 - The meeting was adjourned at approximately 8:45 pm



February 2, 2024

To: Agency of Natural Resources - Secretary, Julie Moore
Department of Forest, Parks & Recreation - Commissioner, Danielle Fitzko;
Department of Fish & Wildlife - Commissioner, Chris Herrick;
cc: Town of Waterbury Select Board; Shutesville Hill Wildlife Corridor
Partnership Members; Agency of Commerce and Community Development -
Secretary, Lindsay Kurrele; State Representative, Theresa Wood; State
Representative, Tom Stevens; State Representative, Amy Sheldon; Senator, Ann
Cummings; Senator, Andrew Perchlik; Senator, Anne Watson

**Re: Waterbury Conservation Commission Comments to the Draft
Worcester Range Long Range Management Plan**

The Waterbury Conservation Commission (Commission) respectfully submits the following comments to the Agency of Natural Resources regarding the Worcester Range Long Range Management (WRMU) Plan (Draft Plan). The Commission – through the lens and context of Core Principles of Conservation, e.g. Conserving Vermont’s Natural Heritage and Act 59(H.126) – is acting in its role as a public interest representative of Waterbury and broadly as state citizens. The Commission is uniquely qualified to submit these comments because it has a long history of studying, protecting, and educating members of the public about the risks of forest fragmentation and the significance of the Shutesville Hill Wildlife Corridor: the only viable pathway for wildlife moving between the Green Mountains and Worcester Range” (Stowe Land Trust, 2017). Our focus is on maintaining biodiversity within the forest and connectivity blocks. The Commission is a founding member of the Shutesville Hill Wildlife Corridor Partnership. Formed in 2010, the partnership consists of local, statewide and international organizations that have been working to keep the Shutesville Hill Wildlife Corridor open and safe. The partnership is also part of the Staying Connected Initiative, an international public-private partnership, with statewide

partners including the Agency of Natural Resources and the Vermont Land Trust, along with international organizations such as The Nature Conservancy.

The Shutesville Corridor is recognized as “[O]ne of the five most important wildlife crossings in the state and a critical part of an international network of connected forest habitats in the northeast.” (Staying Connected Initiative, 2012). In this larger context, the Worcester Range is part of a priority linkage area between three distinct biophysical regions – the Green Mountains, the Piedmont, and the Northeastern Highlands – all of which are critically important habitat for wildlife in the Northeast. The North Hill forest block, a subset of the Worcester Range, is further recognized as “a rare and irreplaceable natural area due to its particular and unique attributes.” (Public Utility Commission of Vermont, 2017). The Draft Plan itself identifies the WRMU as a “critical landscape-scale habitat linkage.” At page 118, the Draft Plan speaks to promoting connectivity provided by Shutesville. Thus, the Corridor is an uncommon and outstanding resource.

Although the the Draft Plan recognizes the Shutesville Corridor, the Plan understates its significance for local, regional and international wildlife communities (Morse, 2021), simply noting that it crosses Route 100 and is a focus of local communities (State of Vermont Agency of Natural Resources, 2023). Respectfully, it is the focus of the state, national and international communities and entities as demonstrated by the membership of the Shutesville Hill Partnership. For the reasons stated above and in the Draft Plan, it therefore deserves to be treated as either an Ecological Reserve Area or a Biodiversity Conservation Area (State of Vermont, 2023). Importantly, the Draft Plan should carefully reconsider its identification of management areas to ensure that Highest Priority Interior Forest Blocks and Highest Priority Connectivity Blocks (Department of Fish & Wildlife, 2015), along with other areas comprising the key wildlife linkages through the Worcester Range as Highly Sensitive Management Areas. Several parcels within the Shutesville Hill Corridor are designated as Special Management Areas (including SM 2.2C) or General Management Areas, which should be carefully evaluated to determine if the proposed uses and management activities are compatible with the preservation of the corridor’s value.

For example the Draft Plan considers the wildlife corridors to be complementary to recreation. Recreation as defined by Vermont State Statute (The Vermont

Statutes Online, 1997), has a broad definition. The long-term compatibility of ecological protection and the range of possible recreational activities is undetermined. Lack of data on even the current use of the area compounds future impact uncertainty. Any heightened or expansion of recreation in this area is secondary to the establishment of ecological parameters essential to the continued long-term viability and protection of the natural resource. Before permitting new or expanded recreation within this special and significant resource, the Draft Plan deserves to be delineated by intended recreational uses, complimented by a deep understanding of the impacts of each intended recreational use, utilizing a structured and consistent evaluative framework. Moreover, if the State will not give heightened protection to this resource, on land it owns, the efforts of the Conservation Commission and other organizations to protect the corridor(s) will be compromised.

The Worcester Range is one of the state's largest contiguous forest blocks and houses an irreplaceable, invaluable and biodiverse linkage for wildlife movement throughout the greater region. The value of this linkage has never been higher; connectivity is vital to the survival and health of animal communities (and the larger natural communities that rely on their movement) in the face of climate change, fragmentation, and habitat loss. Through the lens of connectivity, this Commission views the conservation of the Worcester Range supporting and buffering this linkage as the utmost priority. We urge the Draft Plan to do the same. As explained above, we ask that the Draft Plan provide the greatest protection to high priority forest and connectivity blocks and reconsider the management and uses permitted within areas identified as wildlife core habitats and connectivity corridors.

We appreciate your consideration of these comments, please do not hesitate to contact us if you have any questions.

Sincerely,

Waterbury Conservation Commission

ADDENDUM – Other considerations

- The Worcester Range harbors the largest almost completely unfragmented wild forest north of 1-89. When the Trust for Public Land helped the state make the recent purchase on the east slope of Hunger Mountain, and the state applied for federal funds the Worcester range was described by the state as “Vermont’s last undeveloped mountain range”
- A 2020 survey conducted by ANR indicated resource protection being the highest priority for 85% of respondents topping all other priorities.
- The Staying Connected Initiative is an international partnership of public and private organizations. The goal of (SCI) is to sustain, conserve, and restore landscape connectivity across the Northern Appalachians to the Acadian region, in order to mitigate the impacts of habitat fragmentation and climate change. Central to that goal has been the definition of key linkage areas: geographically defined places where—if landscape connectivity is lost—wide-ranging mammals like bear, moose, and bobcat will be limited in their ability to move between the region’s core habitat areas, reducing genetic exchange between populations and threatening their long-term survival.

The Worcester Range to Northeast Kingdom is a priority linkage area covering roughly 1 million acres (405,000 hectares) in Vermont. Within this area there are three distinct biophysical regions - the Green Mountains, the Piedmont, and the Northeastern Highlands, all of which are critically important landscapes for wildlife. Some of the most wild, intact forested areas in the state occur in this linkage, where traditional lifestyles and nature-based recreation contribute to maintaining the natural values and abundance of wildlife in the area. Connecting the Worcester Range to Northeast Kingdom through improved transportation infrastructure and ecological restoration ensures that both wildlife and local communities continue to thrive in this special place.

- Act 59 calls for efforts to be guided by 2018 ANR doc, Vermont Conservation Design. It recommends restoring 9% of the States Forest to old-growth conditions if it wants to maximize the climate resilience benefits those ecosystems offer, like clean water and flood protection.
- Lower elevations in the WRMU Draft include a continuous 3400 acre forest block on the eastern side of the range categorized as a General Management area and targeted for timber operations and expanded recreational access. In the WRMU Draft, these areas under general management are not defined by ecologically sensitive features or important wildlife habitat. Forest blocks buffering natural areas enhance the habitat and add resilience to human and natural disturbances and stressors.
- The WRMU draft (pg. 154) management actions for Mt Hunger are in part as follows: If backcountry skiing is found to be compatible with management goals,

seek to develop a partnership with CTA or similar partner groups to consider formal management of backcountry skiing.

- VMBA (Vermont Mountain Bike Association) is campaigning for ANR to “Explicitly consider proposals for non-motorized trail development in Highly Sensitive Management Areas”
- Andrew Perchlik who sits on the Senate transportation Committee worries transportation expenses such as bridge repairs and road construction are going up while revenues from gas taxes are going down. Residents worry of the impacts logging will have over the next 20 years on gravel roads that already need frequent repairs due to storm impacts and the increased traffic from recreation visitors create a whole other set of problems and expenses.
- “Cumulative effects - how the collective impacts of countless small and seemingly inconsequential anthropogenic events compromise wildlife well-being. Recreational paths open the way to those events, and can harm wildlife through.” (Morse, 2021)
 - “Impacts to refugia. However seemingly harmless, trails introduce significant stress factors within wildlife refugia that sustain numerous species...”
 - “Altered wildlife behaviors. When wild animals are flushed needlessly and repeatedly, their alarm and flight behaviors affect them in two ways. The cumulative effects of increased energetic demands for such activity may prove too costly for some animals, especially during the winter or during other periods of food storage. Studies show increased mortality for disrupted wildlife, such as when wildlife expend energy when flushed (Whitfield et al., 2008; Taylor and Knight, 2003b); are displaced over extended periods of time (Neumann et al., 2010). Secondly, some species may limit their use of, or even completely forsake what would otherwise be preferred foraging and resting habitats. Such altered behaviors and missed opportunities for optimal food and cover will insidiously compromise the fitness, sustainability and diversity of many species over time.” (Morse, 2021)
 - “Decline of resident species. Researchers from the Department of Environmental Science Policy and Management at the University of California, Berkeley surveyed mammalian carnivores in 28 parks and preserves. Paired comparisons of neighboring protected areas, with and without recreation, revealed that the presence of dispersed non-motorized recreation led to a five-fold decline in the density of native carnivores. These biologists also noted a substantial shift in community composition from native to non-native species. (Reed and Merenlender, 2008)” (Morse, 2021)

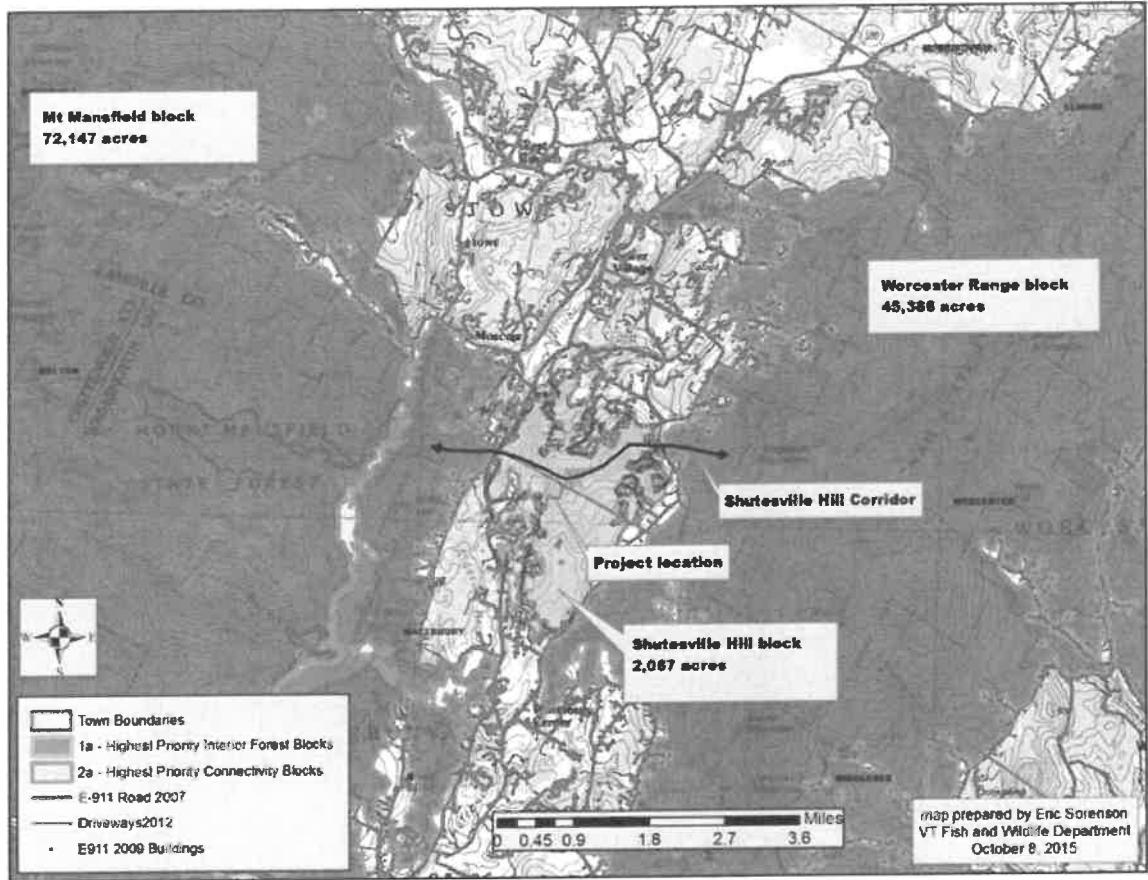
- “One study (Taylor and Knight, 2003b) summarized known impacts and shared the following startling information: “Millions of visitors annually are attracted to public lands to engage in recreational activities. Because outdoor recreation is the second leading cause for the decline of all federally listed, threatened and endangered species on public lands (Losos et al., 1995), and the fourth leading cause on all lands (Czech et al., 2000), natural resource managers are becoming increasingly concerned about impacts of recreation on wildlife (Guzwiller, 1995)” (Morse, 2021)

Map 2



(Department of Fish & Wildlife, 2015)

Map 3



(Department of Fish & Wildlife, 2015)



Worcester Range Photos Courtesy of Susan Morse

References

- Department of Fish & Wildlife. (2015). *Vermont Conservation Design: Maintaining and Enhancing an Ecologically Functional Landscape*.
- Morse, S. C. (2021, November 22). *Cumulative Effects* [Follow-up to Andrews Community Forest Committee].
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<https://legislature.vermont.gov/Documents/2022/Docs/ACTS/ACT050/ACT050%20As%20Enacted.pdf>
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- Staying Connected Initiative. (2012). *The Shutesville Hill Wildlife Corridor - Helping Vermont Wildlife Thrive*.
- The Stowe Land Trust. (2017, December 22). *News: Putting the Shutesville Hill Wildlife Corridor on the Map*. Stowe Land Trust. Retrieved January 31, 2024, from
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- The Vermont Statutes Online. (1997, Unknown Unknown). *Vermont Laws - Title 12: Court Procedure Chapter 203*. Vermont Laws. Retrieved January 31, 2024, from <https://legislature.vermont.gov/statutes/section/12/203/05792>