



**Vermont
Agricultural Water
Quality Partnership
(VAWQP)**

Strategic Plan

2019-2024



Vermont Agricultural Water Quality Partnership

VISION

Vermont will be populated by farms that are vibrant, robust, and sustainable who steward their land to improve water quality and wildlife habitat for the benefit of their farms, the connected ecosystems, the public, and for the general good of Vermont.

PURPOSE & MISSION

Improve agricultural water quality in Vermont by coordinating partner efforts to provide education, technical and financial assistance to the farming community.

OVERARCHING GOALS

- 1) To improve water quality and wildlife habitat on all engaged farmland owner's and operators' properties
- 2) Deliver technical and financial assistance in the most efficient and effective manner
- 3) Provide the best service experience possible for the landowner

OBJECTIVES

To help achieve its vision, purpose, mission, and overarching goals, VAWQP will advance the following objectives and tasks between 2019 and 2024.

- 1. *Build a stronger collaboration* 4
- 2. *Identify, connect, share and coordinate research and learning across VAWQP partners and others*..... 6
- 3. *Utilize research and learning to evaluate, adjust, and innovate on specific practices and tools across the partners.* 8
- 4. *Ensure training of staff across partner organizations.* 11
- 5. *Create consistent, coherent, meaningful messages for Partner staff, farmers, and the public.* 13
- 6. *Align Tactical Basin Planning and prioritization efforts and ensure effectiveness of jointly targeted watershed strategies.* 15

MEMBERS

- USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS)
- Vermont Association of Conservation Districts (VACD)
- Vermont Agency of Agriculture, Food and Markets (VAAFM)
- US Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS)
- University of Vermont Extension (UVM Extension)
- USDA Farm Service Agency (FSA)
- Vermont Agency of Natural Resources, Department of Environmental Conservation (VANR-DEC)
- Lake Champlain Basin Program (LCBP)
- Vermont Housing and Conservation Board (VHCB)



OBJECTIVE I: BUILD A STRONGER COLLABORATION



The VAWQP seeks to advance a more robust, intentional, and structured collaboration in its next five years of engagement. This collaboration will aid the partners to communicate clearly and consistently, focus their research and program dollars efficiently and effectively, deliver impactful programs and practices, and to refine, hone, or develop new programs based on the best available research.

Objective Champion: Jess Buckley (State Natural Resources Conservation Council and Vermont Association of Conservation Districts)

#	Task	Key Actions	Indicators of Success	By Whom	By When
1	Create and sustain a formal partnership structure	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Formalize a Steering Committee of key staff and managers from across partners to meet on a regular basis Create clear agendas, minutes, decision rules, and effective meetings for the partners Establish “teams” for key elements of the VAWQP strategic plan including communications and research 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> A formal structure for the VAQWP is developed, implemented and sustained through 2024 Partners meet regularly in productive, efficient meetings 	Partners with support from the VAWQP Coordinator	January 2020 and on-going
2	Hire a staff person to coordinate the Partnership	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Develop a job description, identify funding sources and administrative arrangements, hire and retain a coordinator who supports the Partnership 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> A coordinator is hired and effectively fulfills her/his duties 	By partner funders, including AAFM, DEC, NRCS, VACD, LCBP and UVM Extension	31 March 2020

OBJECTIVE 1: BUILD A STRONGER COLLABORATION CONT.

#	Task	Key Actions	Indicators of Success	By Whom	By When
3	Support a Shared Partner Data Base	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Finalize the shared data base with appropriate levels of protection to help provide consistent data collection, access to information across agencies, easier planning and BMP review and location, & ability to export data Update and utilize this database across programs and organizations 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> A data base, with appropriate confidentiality protections, is established and used by all partners The data base is used actively across partner organizations The data base is actively updated by partner organizations 	Completed and disseminated by AAFM and utilized by all partners	Finalized by 1 September 2019; utilized on-going
4	Initiate an annual programmatic review across Partners efforts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Convene and utilize an annual programmatic review to identify common learning, areas for leveraging joint funds, and help to ensure partner programs are synergistic and coordinated 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> An annual program review is conducted each year until 2024 by all partners across programs The annual program review leads to insights and improvements. 	VAWQP Coordinator plans, convenes, facilitates, and synthesizes effort with Partners actively participating and modifying their programs as appropriate	First review by 31 December 2020 and annually thereafter
5	Evaluate the Partnership for continuous improvement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Use surveys and other tools to assess the success of the partnership against metrics developed by the Partnership 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Annual evaluations with various tools take place Results of evaluation are discussed among the partners and process changes are made for continuous improvement where needed The Strategic Plan and its goals, objectives, and tasks are monitored and tracked by all partners. 	VAWQP Coordinator utilizes surveys, conversations and reflection time in meetings to ensure this occurs and Partners participate actively	On-going, but at least annually

OBJECTIVE 2: IDENTIFY, CONNECT, SHARE AND COORDINATE RESEARCH AND LEARNING ACROSS VAWQP PARTNERS AND OTHERS

VAWQP seeks to better align and direct resources spent on research across the partners to address the most pressing gaps, questions, issues, and needs of the State. Research can both inform the partners of the efficacy of existing practices for reducing agricultural impacts to water quality as well as develop innovative approaches and tools that do not currently exist.

Objective Co-Champions: Dan Lerner (University of Vermont) and Eric Howe (Lake Champlain Basin Program)

#	Task	Key Actions	Indicators of Success	By Whom	By When
1	Inventory existing research being done by various institutions and researchers on these issues	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Develop and utilize an accessible inventory to capture recent and current research funded or underway by partners' organizations in Vermont or the region. Develop the inventory's set of operational rules addressing such questions as who can access, how actual papers or reports are made available, what constitutes quality for inclusion, what disclaimers are needed, and who maintains and manages 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> An inventory is designed and completed and updated periodically 	LCBP hosts this inventory and coordinated and updated by the VAWQP Coordinator with assistance from other Partners	By 31 December 2019 and regularly thereafter
2	Prioritize partner research dollars and resources toward data gaps identified in the 2019 Water Quality Week and other events	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Form a partners' technical work group Review proceedings of the 2019 Water Quality Week and other events; identify key data gaps; identify gaps to be filled Based on findings, in part, support implementation of the Conservation Effects Assessment Project funded by NRCS. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Workgroup develops list of Data gaps that need to be addressed each year 	VAWQP Coordinator plans, convenes, facilitates, and synthesizes effort and Partners participate in technical work group	By 31 December 2019, and annually thereafter

OBJECTIVE 2: IDENTIFY, CONNECT, SHARE AND COORDINATE RESEARCH AND LEARNING ACROSS VAWQP PARTNERS AND OTHERS CONT.

#	Task	Key Actions	Indicators of Success	By Whom	By When
3	Host a biennial (every two years) water quality summit	The partners host a biennial research summit where researchers share their findings, results, and on-going work with partners, including Vermont, regional and national experts. The summit may include a public as well as technical staff-focused portion over several days.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Agenda items for May 2021 identified by December 2020 • Two more Water Quality Weeks held 2021, 2023. • Outcomes of water quality summits lead to new lines of inquiry or action 	VAWQP coordinator plans, convenes, facilitates, and synthesizes effort, with support from VAWQP partners	By May 2021 and May 2023
4	Hold annual partners meetings	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Host annual Partners meeting for staff and management to share research, learnings, evaluations, innovations, program efforts, and general information sharing • The annual partners meeting should be accompanied by an annual Leadership meeting 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Five annual Partners meetings, including a meeting summary, have been completed by 2024 • Leaders are co-convened with all staff once each year 	VAWQP coordinator plans, convenes, facilitates, and synthesizes effort, with participation from VAWQP partners	By February 2020 and thereafter annually



OBJECTIVE 3: UTILIZE RESEARCH AND LEARNING TO EVALUATE, ADJUST, AND INNOVATE ON SPECIFIC PRACTICES AND TOOLS ACROSS THE PARTNERS

The VAWQP seeks to ensure that the best available research informs and guides the practices on the ground that the partners promote and fund. Given the complexity of water quality, natural systems, and agricultural practices, research can help inform improved practices, retire those practices that prove not to be effective, and create new tools that can help advance water quality. The Partners strongly affirm that research should and can inform management.



Objective Champion: Vicky Drew (Natural Resource Conservation Service)

#	Task	Key Actions	Indicators of Success	By Whom	By When
1	Conduct a study to determine impacts of existing conservation practices	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Undertake and complete the <u>Conservation Effects Assessment Project</u> (CEAP) study 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> A completed CEAP study Results of the CEAP study inform future programs funding and practice choices 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> NRCS in the lead with support from other Partners 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> June 2022

OBJECTIVE 3: UTILIZE RESEARCH AND LEARNING TO EVALUATE, ADJUST, AND INNOVATE ON SPECIFIC PRACTICES AND TOOLS ACROSS THE PARTNERS CONT

#	Task	Key Actions	Indicators of Success	By Whom	By When
2	Conduct annual conservation practice reviews regarding intended effects	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Prioritize each year the key tools, practices or emerging issues for review • Conduct the review of prioritized and specific tools and practices (such as feed management, cover cropping, tile drainage, manure injection, infrastructure) and prepare a summary of review findings • Using the latest research, science, monitoring, and evaluation data, partners will evaluate the value of specific practices and make suggested adjustments to their funding and role in programs across the partnership • Results would be linked to current BMP tracking team. • Systems of practices will also be reviewed to determine if a combination of practices should be promoted or avoided 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Key tools and practices are prioritized each year for review • Practice review committees are formed • Practice review committees have completed their work on a number of practices and tools for use in in 2020 and annually thereafter • Practice and systems review summaries of findings/recommendations are written and distributed among the partners. • Field staff and service providers are kept up to date on data from their work/area and educated about changes based on the reviews 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Steering Committee prioritizes issues for review & names review committee members • VAWQP Coordinator convenes, supports, and prepares reports for these review committees • Partners staff participate in review committees 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tools and practices prioritized by at least 1 February 2020 for that year's review • Reviews completed by at least 1 June 2020 and annually thereafter
3	Adjust funding of practices and tools based on practice review and train technical staff in the changes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Given practice review, VAWQP recommends potential adjustments to Partners agency practices and tools, and changes needed to funding specific practices given their effectiveness • The recommended changes, if accepted, are included in trainings to staff and others who administer programs and practices 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Agencies adjust policies, rankings, and funding for practices and tools based on outcome of Partners annual reviews • Trainings are held for the changes made 	Individual partner agencies who administer programs, funding, and practices	In the next funding cycle after May 2021 and annually thereafter

OBJECTIVE 3: UTILIZE RESEARCH AND LEARNING TO EVALUATE, ADJUST, AND INNOVATE ON SPECIFIC PRACTICES AND TOOLS ACROSS THE PARTNERS CONT.

#	Task	Key Actions	Indicators of Success	By Whom	By When
4	Share learnings from innovative practices and experiments	Partners support the development and demonstration of different tools, actions or practices, engage in some form of evaluation and learning, and share with Partners	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Partners share learnings from new tools, practice development or demonstrations Funding organizations include in their agreements with researchers the expectation of sharing learning for Partners such as presentations, webinars, or fact sheets 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Individual partner agencies Sharing of innovation information coordinated by VAWQP coordinator 	On-going and as needed



OBJECTIVE 4: ENSURE TRAINING OF STAFF ACROSS PARTNER ORGANIZATIONS

The VAWQP seeks to provide all Partners’ staff opportunities to advance their skills and knowledge regardless of where or by whom training is offered, increase shared and consistent expertise across Partners’ staff, and increase awareness of the “ecosystem” of work that the Partners provide on agriculture and water quality.

Objective Champion: Nina Gage, (Vermont Agency of Agriculture, Food and Markets)

#	Task	Key Actions	Indicators of Success	By Whom	By When
1	Assess needs and strategically select and make available priority trainings across organizations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Partners identify those trainings in changed practices or tools, new innovations or new skills that are needed across partners’ staff Partners identify ways to provide or create training to meet these needs Partners use innovative tools to deliver training and learning 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Partners support delivery of strategic training necessary to advance strategic objectives across partners’ staff Partners create new tools such as video, VAWQP online platform, or other means to disseminate information to field staff regarding recent research insights, local research results, etc. 	VAWQP Coordinator supports partners in identifying and helping provide strategic training with Partner staff or others designing and delivering training	On-Going
2	Create and deliver a training for all partner new staff on the VAQWP	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Develop a brief training, in-person or web-based that can be delivered to new staff across the Partners twice per year. The training can ensure all staff know about the VAWQP, its mission and objectives, and the role of each Partner 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> VAWQP training is created and delivered twice per year. 	VAWQP Coordinators works with Partners to develop and deliver	First training to be help September 2020 and twice annually thereafter



**OBJECTIVE 4: ENSURE TRAINING OF STAFF ACROSS PARTNER ORGANIZATIONS
CONT.**

#	Task	Key Actions	Indicators of Success	By Whom	By When
3	Make accessible training opportunities across Partners	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Develop a shared calendar or system for making easily accessible the listing of trainings available to staff across partner organizations 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Easily accessible listing of potential trainings is available to and utilized by all Partners' staff 	ANRCE with support from the VAWQP Coordinator	By 31 December 2019

OBJECTIVE 5: CREATE CONSISTENT, COHERENT, MEANINGFUL MESSAGES FOR PARTNER STAFF, FARMERS, AND THE PUBLIC

The Agriculture and Natural Resources Communicators for the Environment (ANRCE) will work to coordinate outreach needs for the VAWQP by creating unified messaging for farmers, the public and policy makers. ANRCE will also coordinate internal communication needs for the employees of the partnership via an internal SharePoint site in an effort to create enhanced understanding about each other’s programs and services. The team will conduct external outreach through multiple communication platforms, including a website presence, fact sheet, farm tours, coordinate exhibits at events, and other means.



Objective Champion: Amy Overstreet (Natural Resource Conservation Service)

#	Task	Key Actions	Indicators of Success	By Whom	By When
1	Create and sustain an effective partnership communications team	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Establish the VT Agriculture and Natural Resources Communicators for the Environment (ANRCE), a team of communications specialists from across the VAWQP Partners who coordinate regularly and share resources, plan partnership events, and collaborate on shared messaging. The mission is to create consistent, coherent, meaningful messages internally and externally Review and revise, to the extent needed, the original VAWQP communications plan 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Meets regularly and continues through 2024 A VT Ag and Natural Resources Communicators for the Environment annual plan establishes goals and timelines for communication products, campaigns, events, etc. More cohesive messaging among the VAWQP membership in regard to water quality goals, measures, successes, and milestones 	NRCS chairs the ANRCE team and coordinates with each partners communications representative	June 2019 and bimonthly 2019 and on-going

OBJECTIVE 5: CREATE CONSISTENT, COHERENT, MEANINGFUL MESSAGES FOR PARTNER STAFF, FARMERS, AND THE PUBLIC CONT.

#	Task	Key Actions	Indicators of Success	By Whom	By When
2	Create a platform for internal sharing of information/resources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop a plan to implement an internal platform where VAWQP partners can share resources, documents, events, etc. • Obtain feedback from the VAQWP Steering Committee and then implement the platform 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A platform is employed that is easy to access and navigate and provides a storehouse for documents, educational resources, calendar of events, and more • Employees feel more connected, engaged, and knowledgeable about the services and programs of the entities that comprise the partnership 	ANRCE	By 1 October 2019
3	Develop common communication products to unify the partnership	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Revised mission and vision for the Partnership • Internal use talking points define the mission goals of the VAWQP (would include org chart for each entity to define roles) • A VAWQP Joint Annual Report showcases the individual and collective water quality milestones achieved each fiscal year • An annual legislative tour hosted by the VAWQP & joint legislative session that highlights outstanding stewards in Vermont and gives constituents a chance to see the benefits on the farm • An externally focused website that serves as a storefront for the VAWQP and leads to individual websites of the partners 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Concise and clear vision and mission • Consistent understanding and related talking points as to the purpose and intent of the Partnership across Partners leaders and staff • Products and events amplify the collaborative successes of the Partnership 	ANRCE with the VAWQP Coordinate assisting to the extent needed	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Revised mission by 1 October 2019 • Internal talking by 1 November 2019 • First joint annual report by 15 January 2020 • First legislative tour Sept 2019, and Legislative Outreach Session by 1 April 2020 • External website by 31 December 2019

OBJECTIVE 6: ALIGN BASIN PLANNING AND PRIORITIZATION EFFORTS AND ENSURE EFFECTIVENESS OF JOINTLY TARGETED WATERSHED STRATEGIES



The VAWQP seeks to reduce redundancy and increase engagement of Partners in planning and prioritization efforts by utilizing the Tactical Basin Planning process. The VAWQP also seeks to review existing efforts to focus Partners' resources on targeted watersheds to determine this strategy's effectiveness and then to use that learning to either continue work on existing priorities and/or to refocus efforts on new or different priority watersheds.

Objective Champion: Marli Rupe (Vermont Agency of Natural Resources, Department of Environmental Conservation)

#	Task	Key Actions	Indicators of Success	By Whom	By When
1	Evaluate and learn from recent Partner efforts in prioritized watersheds	Utilizing NRCS evaluation, case studies, data, and assessment of staff resources and results, identify key lessons learned and challenges from Partners focused efforts on recent prioritized watershed	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lessons learned are identified • Outcomes and impacts of targeted efforts are estimated • Benefits and costs are estimated to determine general effectiveness of this strategy • Partnership develops a process for future prioritization of watersheds building from or across Technical Basin Plans 	NRCS leads evaluation effort with strong support from Partners	1 April 2020

OBJECTIVE 6: ALIGN BASIN PLANNING AND PRIORITIZATION EFFORTS AND ENSURE EFFECTIVENESS OF JOINTLY TARGETED WATERSHED STRATEGIES CONT.

#	Task	Key Actions	Indicators of Success	By Whom	By When
2	Utilize Tactical Basin Planning to Prioritize watersheds within each Basin	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Using the existing and refined Tactical Basin Planning led by DEC, Partners participate actively to identify watersheds within each Basin that might receive jointly targeted assistance DEC TBP staff coordinate with Partners to engage them in 5-year basin planning updates Partners engage in regional ag workgroups, where applicable, to identify priority areas, data gaps, and develop TBP strategies Data collected to-date brought into and utilized in the planning 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> All 14 basin plans revised by 2024 include prioritized watersheds informed by active participation by Partners in the planning process Key watersheds across Basins are prioritized by the Partners Partners are engaged in the TBP process and are aware of and support the process and results 	DEC with assistance & participation from Partners	All Basins TBPs revised by 2024
3	Commit resources to prioritized watersheds	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Partners commit staff and/or funding resources as possible and applicable to existing or newly prioritized watersheds to ensure completion of work and impact Partners determine if and where new targeted work will occur On-going data collected is regularly shared with field staff and service providers working in these watersheds 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Currently targeted watersheds receive necessary support to complete efforts to ensure impact in these areas Partners individual agencies withdraw from or focus new efforts on those watersheds recommended by the Partners after careful review Funds and staff resources that are deployed to prioritized watersheds collaborate effectively and work closely with local stakeholders to ensure ownership and outcomes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Partners individual organizations regarding funding VAWQP Coordinator assists with review and recommending process for Partners 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> For currently targeted watersheds, commit necessary funds and staff by 1 September 2020 For determining new or retracting from existing targets by 1 September 2020

ADDENDUM: COLLABORATIVE STRUCTURE

The Vermont Agricultural Water Quality Partnership has created a structure to ensure coordination, engagement and participation by the Partner organizations, their leadership, management and staff, all assisted by the VAWQP Coordinator, a full-time position serving at the behest of the Steering Committee.

The below chart generally outlines the VAWQP entities, the purpose of each entity, the participants, and how frequently they meet as laid out by the MOU and strategic plan (SP).

