



Vermont Agricultural Water Quality Partnership



Strategic Plan

2026 - 2030

VISION

We envision a future where Vermont's vibrant working lands serve as a cornerstone of environmental stewardship and conservation, enhancing water quality and wildlife habitat. These agricultural and forestry enterprises will support a thriving economy, foster connected and resilient ecosystems, and contribute to the overall well-being of Vermont and its residents.

PURPOSE & MISSION

Coordinate partner efforts to improve agricultural water quality in Vermont by providing education, technical and financial assistance to land stewards.



For more information visit www.vtagcleanwater.org.



GOALS

1. Improve water quality, soil health and wildlife habitats on working lands.
2. Provide technical and financial assistance efficiently and effectively.
3. Deliver high-quality service to working lands stewards.



OBJECTIVES

1. Sustain and strengthen collaborative relationships. - *Page 3*
2. Identify research needs and questions, coordinate research efforts, and share findings and learning across the VAWQP partners and others to evaluate, adjust and innovate program, practices and tools. - *Page 7*
3. Ensure staff training across partner organizations. - *Page 11*
4. Create consistent, coherent, meaningful messages for partner staff, land stewards and the public. - *Page 14*
5. Align Tactical Basin Planning and prioritization efforts to ensure effectiveness of jointly focused watershed strategies. - *Page 18*



OBJECTIVE 1:

SUSTAIN AND STRENGTHEN COLLABORATIVE RELATIONSHIPS

The VAWQP aims to promote a more structured and organized collaboration over the next five years. This collaboration will help Partners communicate clearly and regularly, allocate research and programming funds efficiently, implement effective programs and practices, and refine or develop new programs based on the best available information and research.

Champion: Alli Wells, VAWQP Coordinator

OBJECTIVE 1: Sustain and Strengthen Collaborative Relationships Cont.

Task 1: Sustain a formal Partnership structure.

Key Actions:

- Maintain a Steering Committee consisting of key staff and managers from various Partners to meet regularly, at least six times per year.
- Invite representatives from key initiatives or organizations outside of VAWQP to Steering Committee Meetings to support expanded Partnerships.
- Establish detailed agendas, comprehensive minutes, defined decision rules, and conduct efficient meetings for the Partners.
- Maintain Teams for essential parts of the VAWQP strategic plan.

Indicators of Success:

- A formal structure for the VAQWP is sustained through 2030.
- Partners meet regularly in productive, efficient meetings.

By Whom:

Partners with support from the VAWQP Coordinator.

By When:

January 2026 and ongoing.

Task 2: Maintain funding for VAWQP Coordinator staff position.

Key Actions:

- Retain a coordinator to assist with the VAWQP.

Indicators of Success:

- A coordinator who consistently performs their duties effectively.

By Whom:

By partner funders, including Vermont Agency of Agriculture, Food & Markets (VAAFM), Vermont Agency of Natural Resources- Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC), United States Department of Agriculture Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), Vermont Association of Conservation Districts and Natural Resources Conservation Districts (VACD), Patrick Leahy Lake Champlain Basin Program (LCBP), United States Fish & Wildlife Service (USFWS), and University of Vermont Extension (UVM).

By When:

January 2026 and ongoing.

OBJECTIVE 1: Sustain and Strengthen Collaborative Relationships

Cont.

Task 3: Support Regional Coordination Services.

Key Actions:

- Provide assistance and funding to regional Partners to organize regional coordination meetings that support the mission, goals, and strategic plan of the VAWQP at the local level.
- Tactical Basin Planners attend regional meetings to help local Partnership staff engage with the Tactical Basin Planning Process.
- Facilitate the effective engagement of local Partners, welcoming new and enhanced collaboration beyond the VAWQP Partners to support more incorporation of farm viability into conservation planning. Regional Coordination services will ensure support and training needs regarding 1619 and Personally Identifiable Information (PII) rules, and when they apply in partner collaborations, resources and protocols applicable.

Indicators of Success:

- Regional coordinators collaboratively will hold a minimum of 4 regional meetings annually.
- Regional coordinators will present on findings at a minimum of one VAWQP Steering Committee meeting annually. Information sharing, collaboration, and coordination occurs among technical and financial assistance providers at the regional level.
- Regional VAWQP staff maintain relationships with other regional staff and programs outside of their individual organization, to better support land stewards in utilizing resources.
- Regional VAWQP staff can recognize overlapping efforts and improve processes.
- Regional VAWQP staff feel included in a larger community focused on water quality and conservation.
- VAWQP staff have clarity on information sharing rules, are able to appropriately follow protocols while enhancing collaboration in conservation planning.

By Whom:

VAWQP Regional Coordinators with support from the VAWQP Coordinator.

By When:

Through June 2030, evaluate continued support thereafter.



OBJECTIVE 1: Sustain and Strengthen Collaborative Relationships Cont.

Task 4: Support a Shared Partner Database.

Key Actions:

- Use and share this database with all programs and organizations.
- Assist partner staff in using the VAWQP Database for local coordination.

Indicators of Success:

- The Partner Database and the information contained therein is used appropriately.
- VAWQP organizations and other technical assistance Partners actively use the database.

By Whom:

Maintained by VAAFM and utilized by all Partners.

By When:

Ongoing.

Task 5: Hold Annual Partners Meeting.

Key Actions:

- Host annual (or semiannual, in collaboration with other complementing partner conferences or events) Partners meeting for all staff and management to share information with a focus on collaboration and relationship building.
- Invite Partners beyond VAWQP to attend and participate in the annual conference to encourage collaboration with larger agricultural and conservation Partners.
- The annual Partners meeting should be accompanied by an annual Leadership meeting.

Indicators of Success:

- Five annual Partners meetings, including a meeting summary, by 2030.
- Leaders are convened with all staff once each year.

By Whom:

VAWQP Coordinator plans, convenes, facilitates, and synthesizes effort, with participation from VAWQP Partners.

By When:

March 2026 and annually thereafter.





OBJECTIVE 2:

IDENTIFY RESEARCH NEEDS AND QUESTIONS, COORDINATE RESEARCH EFFORTS, AND SHARE FINDINGS AND LEARNING ACROSS THE VAWQP PARTNERS AND OTHERS TO EVALUATE, ADJUST AND INNOVATE PROGRAMS, PRACTICES AND TOOLS

Research is essential for improving practices, discontinuing ineffective practices, and developing new tools to enhance water quality. VAWQP aims to better coordinate research needs and efforts among Partners to address critical issues in water quality, natural systems, and agriculture. The Partners agree that research should guide management decisions, evaluate current practices, and create innovative solutions.

Champions: Chris Callahan (University of Vermont Extension), Eric Howe (Lake Champlain Basin Program), Travis Thomason (USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service)

OBJECTIVE 2: Identify Research Needs and Questions, Coordinate Research Efforts, and Share Findings and Learning across the VAWQP Partners and Others to Evaluate, Adjust and Innovate Programs, Practices and Tools Cont.

Task 1: Share learnings from innovative practices and experiments applicable to VAWQP work.

Key Actions:

- Each Steering Committee meeting will include time for updates on recent research projects.
- Identify list of platforms and resources where research is published to share with new staff and check regularly. Expand awareness of applicable research outside of Vermont.

Indicators of Success:

- VAWQP monthly newsletter incorporates research publications.
- The Steering Committee will maintain a list of research updates, gaps and needs.

By Whom:

VAWQP Coordinator with assistance from other Partners.

By When:

Quarterly.

Task 2: Prioritize each year key tools, practices or emerging issues.

Key Actions:

- Conduct a 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 VAWQP.
- Input and feedback on conservation practice standard changes are sought from VAWQP staff when practice standards are open for changes.
- Systems of practices will be reviewed to determine if a combination of practices should be promoted or avoided.

Indicators of Success:

- Tools and practices impacted by current research are prioritized for review by March annually.
- Reviews and updates completed by June annually.
- Opportunity to provide input and feedback on practice cost rates is made available to VAWQP staff annually.

By Whom:

VAWQP Partners.

By When:

Annually.

OBJECTIVE 2: Identify Research Needs and Questions, Coordinate Research Efforts, and Share Findings and Learning across the VAWQP Partners and Others to Evaluate, Adjust and Innovate Programs, Practices and Tools Cont.

Task 3: Prioritize partner research dollars and resources.

Key Actions:

- Utilize partner expertise to recommend priorities for the LCBP research program funding.
- Evaluate opportunities for new research funding and dedicated staff reviewed to determine if a combination of practices should be promoted or avoided.

Indicators of Success:

- LCBP research program funding opportunity is informed by Partner recommendations.

By Whom:

Individual partner agencies provide research topic recommendations to LCBP.

By When:

August 2026 and annually thereafter.

Task 4: Host a biennial (every two years) water quality summit.

Key Actions:

- The Partners host a biennial research summit where researchers share their findings, results, and ongoing work with Partners, including Vermont, regional and national experts. The summit may include public as well as technical staff-focused portion over several days.

Indicators of Success:

- Agenda items six months in advance.
- Lake Champlain Research Conference to be held in January 2026, and Water Quality Research Summits to be held 2027 and 2029.
- Outcomes of water quality summits lead to new lines of inquiry or action.

By Whom:

Objective Leads with support of the VAWQP coordinator and Partners to plan, convene, and facilitate.

By When:

By 2027 and 2029.

OBJECTIVE 2: Identify Research Needs and Questions, Coordinate Research Efforts, and Share Findings and Learning across the VAWQP Partners and Others to Evaluate, Adjust and Innovate Programs, Practices and Tools Cont.

Task 5: Adjust funding of practices and tools based on practice review and train technical staff in the changes.

Key Actions:

- Decisions regarding practice recommendation adjustments will have a foundation in research findings.
- Given practice review, VAWQP recommends potential adjustments to Partners agency practices and tools, and changes needed to fund specific practices given their effectiveness.
- The recommended changes, if accepted, are included in trainings to staff and others who administer programs and practices.
- Explore the opportunity of developing a streamlined virtual tool, accessible to all partners, that compares program and practice opportunities and estimates quantified practice outcomes.

Indicators of Success:

- Agencies adjust policies, rankings, and funding for practices and tools based on scientific research and updated conservation practice standards.
- The trainings are made available for VAWQP staff when new standards, tools or policies are made available.

By Whom:

Individual partner agencies who administer programs, funding, and practices.

By When:

Annually.





OBJECTIVE 3:

ENSURE TRAINING OF STAFF ACROSS PARTNER ORGANIZATIONS

The VAWQP aims to offer all Partners' staff opportunities to enhance their skills and knowledge, regardless of the location or provider of the training. The goal is to foster shared and consistent expertise among Partners' staff and raise awareness of the comprehensive services that the Partners deliver in agriculture, water quality, and habitat improvement.

Champion: Nina Gage (VAAFM)

OBJECTIVE 3: Ensure Training of Staff Across Partner Organizations Cont.

Task 1: Identify training needs across organizations.

Key Actions:

- Partners identify training needs based on program, practice, or policy changes, new initiatives or through staff survey results.
- Partners identify ways to provide or create training to meet these needs.
- Partners use innovative tools to deliver training and learning.

Indicators of Success:

- Partners support delivery of training through the creation of 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.

By Whom:

VAWQP Coordinator organizes and supports Partner Staff to identify and develop training topics.

By When:

Ongoing.

Task 2: Maintain the VAWQP Orientation Program for all Partners' new staff.

Key Actions:

- Maintain and enhance the web-based self-guided VAWQP training program to ensure all staff are informed about the VAWQP, its mission, objectives, and the roles of each partner.

Indicators of Success:

- VAWQP training updated annually.
- VAWQP training presentation provided in person at large staff gatherings and virtually on a regular basis.
- Develop and regularly host 1619 MOU training.

By Whom:

VAWQP Coordinator works with Partners to update and deliver.

By When:

Ongoing.

OBJECTIVE 3: Ensure Training of Staff Across Partner Organizations Cont.

Task 3: Make training opportunities accessible across Partners.

Key Actions:

- Utilize the VAWQP Newsletter and Communications Team to disseminate information about training to staff across partner organizations.
- Utilize the VAWQP Lunch & Learn Conservation Webinar Series and Annual Meeting to provide trainings.
- Partners share learnings from new tools, practice development, demonstrations or other forms of research information.
- Relevant research publications and resources added to VAWQP website, or as appropriate, the Orientation program.
- Support staff in managing the workload, and in connection with other Partners.

Indicators of Success:

- Easily accessible listing of potential training is available to and utilized by all Partners' staff.
- Develop a list of all training conducted during the calendar year.
- Funding organizations include in their agreements with researchers the expectation of sharing learning for Partners such as presentations, webinars, or fact sheets.

By Whom:

Objective Champion and VAWQP Coordinator work with Partners.

By When:

Ongoing.

Task 4: Support Field Staff with On-Farm Technical Assistance Skills.

Key Actions:

- Support field staff to conduct farm outreach, in field assessments, to create farm teams when necessary, and provide onsite education to working lands producers by ensuring on farm training opportunities are available.
- Support field staff in developing communication skillset to use when working with agricultural producers.

Indicators of Success:

- Increased staff confidence in field duties
- Improved service experience for the farmer.

By Whom:

Objective Champion and VAWQP Coordinator work with Partners.

By When:

Annually.



OBJECTIVE 4:

CREATE CONSISTENT, COHERENT, MEANINGFUL MESSAGES FOR PARTNER STAFF, LAND STEWARDS, AND THE PUBLIC

The VAWQP Communication Committee will coordinate outreach efforts for the VAWQP by developing unified messaging for Partnership staff. The team will utilize various communication avenues, including website presence, fact sheets, annual reports and webinars. The VAWQP will support and share individual partner organizations messaging through collective audiences.

Champion: Luis Aponte (USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service)

OBJECTIVE 4: Create Consistent, Coherent, Meaningful Messages for Partner Staff, Land Stewards, and the Public Cont.

Task 1: Create and sustain an effective Partnership Communications Team.

Key Actions:

- Sustain the VAWQP Communications 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.

Indicators of Success:

- More cohesive messaging among the VAWQP membership about water quality goals, measures, successes, and milestones.
- Increased messaging is effective in targeting the primary audience of VAWQP staff.

By Whom:

NRCS chairs the VAWQP Communications Team and coordinates with each partner's communications representative.

By When:

Bimonthly.



Rain simulation at VAWQP Southeast Regional Coordination Meeting

OBJECTIVE 4: Create Consistent, Coherent, Meaningful Messages for Partner Staff, Land Stewards, and the Public Cont.

Task 2: Develop and maintain common communication products to unify the VAWQP.

Key Actions:

- Internal use talking points define the mission goals of the VAWQP.
- Continue to support tools that inform the VAWQP and the public including VAWQP reporting, websites, and other communication tools.
- Produce a VAWQP Joint Annual Report that shows the individual and collective water quality milestones achieved each fiscal year.
- Continually update an externally focused website that serves as a representation for the VAWQP and leads to individual websites of the Partners.
- Elicit content from all Partners to make available a monthly VAWQP Newsletter
- VAWQP elevates and disseminates VAWQP supported research and broader research via monthly newsletter.
- Explore the possibility of a virtual tool that can be used to navigate programs and staffing across the state.

Indicators of Success:

- Increase the current monthly newsletter average open rate of 35% to 50%
- VAWQP annual report
- Consistent understanding and related talking points as to the purpose and intent of the VAWQP across Partners leaders and staff.
- Products and events amplify the collaborative successes of the VAWQP.
- Employees feel more connected, engaged, and knowledgeable about the services and programs of the entities that comprise the VAWQP.
- LCBP continues to maintain their science blog.
- Internal talking points annually
- Annual Report January of each year
- External website updated regularly.
- Newsletter monthly

By Whom:

VAWQP Communications Team with the VAWQP Coordinator assisting.

By When:

Ongoing.

OBJECTIVE 4: Create Consistent, Coherent, Meaningful Messages for Partner Staff, Land Stewards, and the Public Cont.

Task 3: Sustain a platform for internal sharing of information/ resources.

Key Actions:

- Sustain an internal platform where VAWQP Partners can share resources, documents, events, etc.

Indicators of Success:

- A platform is employed that is easy to access and navigate shared resources.

By Whom:

VAWQP Communications Team.

By When:

Ongoing.



2019 VAWQP Annual Meeting



OBJECTIVE 5:

ALIGN BASIN PLANNING AND PRIORITIZATION EFFORTS TO ENSURE EFFECTIVENESS OF JOINTLY FOCUSED WATERSHED STRATEGIES

The VAWQP aims to streamline prioritization efforts to increase Partner and producer engagement in the Tactical Basin Planning process, and other partner-facilitated prioritization and planning processes. The VAWQP will evaluate current frameworks and processes, utilize the wealth of data available across these collective efforts and support stakeholder efforts to streamline these efforts.

Champion: Marli Rupe (DEC)

OBJECTIVE 5: Align Basin Planning and Prioritization Efforts to Ensure Effectiveness of Jointly Focused Watershed Strategies Cont.

Task 1: Evaluate and learn from recent Partner efforts in prioritized watersheds. Align resources and processes to support efficiency and effectiveness of prioritization.

Key Actions:

- Utilizing NRCS evaluation, case studies, data, and assessment of staff resources and results, identifying key lessons learned and challenges from Partners focused efforts on recent prioritized watershed.

Indicators of Success:

- Lessons learned are identified.
- Outcomes and impacts of focused efforts are estimated.
- Benefits and costs are estimated to determine the general effectiveness of this task.
- The Partnership provides input to future prioritization of watersheds, building from or across Technical Basin Plans, and assists with sharing of information among partners.
- One monthly Steering Committee meeting is dedicated annually to share updates on the roles and integration of Clean Water Service Providers, Basin Water Quality Councils, the NRCS Locally Led Conservation Delivery Initiative, Regional Coordination Services, LCBP, USFWS and VAAFM alternative restoration plan priorities. The Steering Committee provides input for coordination and streamlining of activities.

By Whom:

NRCS leads evaluation effort with strong support from Partners.

By When:

Annually.



Riparian Buffer Workshop

OBJECTIVE 5: Align Basin Planning and Prioritization Efforts to Ensure Effectiveness of Jointly Focused Watershed Strategies Cont.

Task 2: Utilize Tactical Basin Planning (TBP) to inform VAWQPs prioritization of programs and resources.

Key Actions:

- Using the existing and refined Tactical Basin Planning led by DEC, Partners participate actively to identify water quality issues and needs within each Basin that might receive jointly focused assistance.
- NRCS-led Natural Resource's Conservation District Conservation Action Plans (CAP) should incorporate Tactical Basin Plan data and prioritization, along with other planning tools.
- Evaluate opportunities for aligning funding programs to support collective prioritization efforts.
- Evaluate opportunities to expand stakeholder engagement through leveraging Locally Led Meetings to effectively capture community input.

Indicators of Success:

- Aligned, efficient and coordinated prioritization efforts.
- All 15 basin plans revised by 2030 include prioritization input from active participation by Partners in the planning process, in support of Tactical Basin Plans work to inform water quality needs, gaps and issues.
- 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.
- NRCD Conservation Action Plans will support the locally identified need and developed in a way that supports Tactical Basin Planning strategies.

By Whom:

DEC with assistance & participation from Partners.

By When:

Ongoing, as Tactical Basin Plans are updated every five years.



OBJECTIVE 5: Align Basin Planning and Prioritization Efforts to Ensure Effectiveness of Jointly Focused Watershed Strategies Cont.

Task 3: Commit resources to priority areas and issues identified in Tactical Basin Planning and the Locally Led Conservation Delivery Initiative.

Key Actions:

- Partners commit staff or funding resources as possible and applicable priorities identified in Tactical Basin Plans and Locally Led Conservation Delivery Initiative (including Conservation Action Plans) to ensure completion of work and desired outcomes.
- Partners determine if and where new focused work will occur, utilize the Locally Led Funding Pool approach to increase and target available resources.
- Ongoing data collected is regularly shared with field staff and service providers working in these areas.

Indicators of Success:

- Prioritized areas and issues receive necessary support to complete efforts to ensure progress toward specific water quality goals in these areas.
- Partners individual agencies focus efforts on the priorities recommended by the Partners after careful review.
- Funds and staff resources that are deployed to priorities collaborate effectively and work closely with local stakeholders to ensure ownership and outcomes.

By Whom:

- Partners' individual organizations regarding funding.
- VAWQP Coordinator assists with review and recommending process for Partners.

By When:

Ongoing.



OBJECTIVE 5: Align Basin Planning and Prioritization Efforts to Ensure Effectiveness of Jointly Focused Watershed Strategies Cont.

Task 4: Build stakeholder support for streamlining statewide prioritization efforts including Tactical Basin Planning and the Locally Led Conservation Delivery Initiative.

Key Actions:

- The Steering Committee will utilize their monthly meetings to learn more about the process of Tactical Basin Planning and the Locally Led Conservation Delivery Initiative process to deepen understanding about the purpose, similarities, and differences of these prioritization approaches.
- The Steering Committee will utilize their monthly meetings to hear from stakeholder input on the opportunities and challenges of potentially streamlining prioritization processes.
- The Steering Committee will develop a summary of these conversations, and if applicable, identify opportunities and recommendations.

Indicators of Success:

- The VAWQP increases collaboration and efficiency in prioritization efforts.
- The VAWQP builds trust, collaboration, and support across stakeholders.
- The VAWQP regularly evaluates the prioritization efforts and enhancements to how we do our work, being open to opportunities for efficiency and collaboration.

By Whom:

The VAWQP Steering Committee and VAWQP staff engaged in prioritization.

By When:

By May 2026 and annually thereafter.



Essex County NRCD Tree Planting

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).

Leadership Team

- **Purpose:** Provides policy direction as requested by SC & represents the partnership.
- **Participants:** Principal contacts of the MOU.
- **Meeting Frequency:** Once per year.

Steering Committee (SC)

- **Purpose:** Guides, evaluates & updates SP activities, directs work of coordinator.
- **Participants:** Representatives from each partner named on the MOU.
- **Meeting Frequency:** At least six times per year.

VAWQP Coordinator

- **Purpose:** Administers, convenes, records, organizes & encourages partnership communication
- **Participants:** Administratively employed by NRCC / VACD
- **Meeting Frequency:** Provides bi-monthly updates to SC

Regional Coordination Team

- **Purpose:** Coordinate efforts relating to local projects & make recommendations to agency leaders.
- **Participants:** Local members in NW, NE, Central Winooski River, Central Otter Creek, SW & SE Regions.
- **Meeting Frequency:** At least twice per year.

Subcommittees and Work Groups (5 identified in SP)

- **Purpose:** Review practices, research, and strategies.
- **Participants:** Staff from partners named on the MOU.
- **Meeting Frequency:** Ad hoc, meets as directed by SC.

Communications Team

- **Purpose:** Public & internal engagement, learning, connection.
- **Participants:** Communication staff from parties named on the MOU.
- **Meeting Frequency:** Approximately monthly.