

VERMONT DEPARTMENT OF
ENVIRONMENTAL CONSERVATION

Watershed Management Division
Strategic Plan
2021 – 2022

April 1, 2021



Strategic Plan Overview

Over the last two years, the Division faced several challenges that are important to consider in the context of strategic planning as they have significantly impacted how we work. The first is the reorganization of the Department in support of the implementation of Act 76 (2019), the Clean Water Service Delivery Act, with tactical basin planning (formerly in the Monitoring and Assessment Program) and the Clean Water Initiative Program moving to the newly established Water Investment Division. While this centralizes implementation planning, funding, and financing under one Division, it necessitates additional coordination and communication, both within the Watershed Management Division, as well as between the Watershed Management and Water Investment Divisions.

Another significant challenge has been the coronavirus pandemic, which has universally and comprehensively disrupted life across the globe. In Vermont, the state sent its workforce home to work remotely in March 2020. Stay-at-home orders have resulted in a profound loss of economic activity over the last year and caused unprecedented uncertainty and concern over the state budget. In response to the budget austerity, the state is relying more heavily on vacancy savings to help offset lost revenue, and consequently, four positions within the Watershed Management Division remain unfilled, which places a burden on existing staff as they assume the responsibilities of those unfilled positions.

While the Division was largely able to pivot and adapt to the remote working environment quickly, it has fundamentally changed how we interact with one-another as we rely exclusively on online technology or the phone to communicate. Included among the less tangible and hard to measure impacts are a potential loss of the collegiality that comes with shared workspace and informal conversation. Social distancing requirements have also created challenges for conducting fieldwork.

While this strategic plan is not centered on addressing the challenges of the coronavirus or wholesale replacing the roles and responsibilities of those programs that moved to the Water Investment Division, it is nonetheless informative as we seek to strengthen and optimize our efforts. In this light, it is even more important that this strategic plan improve how we work, and not be a burden to doing our work. The strategic plan is not intended to evaluate and address gaps in our resource management, which is the focus of the Surface Water Management Plan. Instead, it should be considered as an operational plan, honing how we work as a Division.

The Strength-Weaknesses-Opportunities-Threats or SWOT analysis framework was the underlying basis for our strategic planning assessment. The plan was developed through a process that sought to involve all Watershed Management Division staff in this analysis. Through conversations with the Division's eight programs, we identified several areas where we must sharpen our focus and implement sound strategies that address both relative weaknesses and capitalize on significant opportunities. This strategic planning analysis identified six

independent objectives that are necessary to improve our Division's overall effectiveness towards accomplishing our mission. However, merely identifying these needs means nothing without the concurrent strategies necessary to meet them during the lifespan of the plan. The strategies described in this plan are the shorter-term actionable priorities, which collectively, form the roadmap for accomplishing the objective. Finally, the plan sets forth metrics that will help to ensure the strategies reach their desired end points.

This strategic plan is organized into two sections. Section 1 provides an overview of the Watershed Management Division – its mission, vision, and goals; the Division's approach to surface water management through integrated, holistic watershed management; and the organizational structure that supports this approach. The second half of the plan, Section 2, outlines the Division's six objectives and specific strategies to accomplish them during the two-year timeframe of the strategic plan. Where appropriate, metrics and next steps provide additional clarity and set expectations for the strategy's implementation.

Section 1: Watershed Management Division Overview

The Watershed Management Division in the Vermont Department of Environmental Conservation is responsible for protecting and restoring the quality of Vermont's surface water resources, which in the context of this plan, include wetlands, lakes and ponds, and rivers and streams. Inherent in this effort is the support of both healthy ecosystems and public uses in and on these surface waters.

The Division includes three media-based programs – Wetlands, Lakes and Ponds, and Rivers – focused on resource-specific management through monitoring and assessment, outreach and technical assistance, and regulatory programs. The Division also administers three federally delegated permitting programs – Stormwater, Wastewater, and CAFO (Concentrated Animal Feeding Operations) – that regulate discharges to surface waters. Two additional programs provide cross-divisional support – the Monitoring and Assessment Program, focused on integrated assessment and biomonitoring; and BOSS (Business Operational and Support Services), which provides administrative, financial, and compliance services for the Division. In total, the Division employs 93 permanent staff and approximately 15 temporary staff. The Division also benefits from several partnership positions with organizations such as Lake Champlain Sea Grant, NEIWPC, and ECO AmeriCorps.

Integrated, Holistic Watershed Management

The interrelationship of land use impacts and the connectivity of watershed resources are the primary reasons why surface water assessment, management, protection, and restoration need to be conducted from a watershed perspective. As water moves downstream through a watershed, an activity that affects the water quality, quantity, or rate of movement at one location affects the characteristics of the waters at locations downstream. Therefore, activities within a watershed are best managed through a coordinated process, with consideration of their relative and cumulative impacts, to effectively manage the resource.

FIGURE 1. WATERSHED MANAGEMENT DIVISION PROGRAMS



Given the physical nature of watersheds, the consideration of land-based activities affecting watersheds, and the synergy between the individual watershed elements (e.g., rivers, lakes, and wetlands), a corresponding organizational structure is the most predictable and comprehensive means of ensuring clear, efficient, and effective surface water management. The central goal driving the composition and design of the Division's organizational structure is to better leverage the concept of holistic watershed management (the Division's organization chart is posted at https://anr.vermont.gov/about_us/org-charts).

The Watershed Management Division's Mission, Vision, and Goals succinctly describe what we seek to achieve and how we work toward achieving it. This strategic plan identifies objectives, specific strategies for achieving them, and in most cases, metrics for the two calendar years of the plan, 2021 and 2022, that will advance us further toward our goals.

Mission: To manage Vermont's surface water resources efficiently and effectively through a comprehensive, integrated, and holistic watershed-based system.

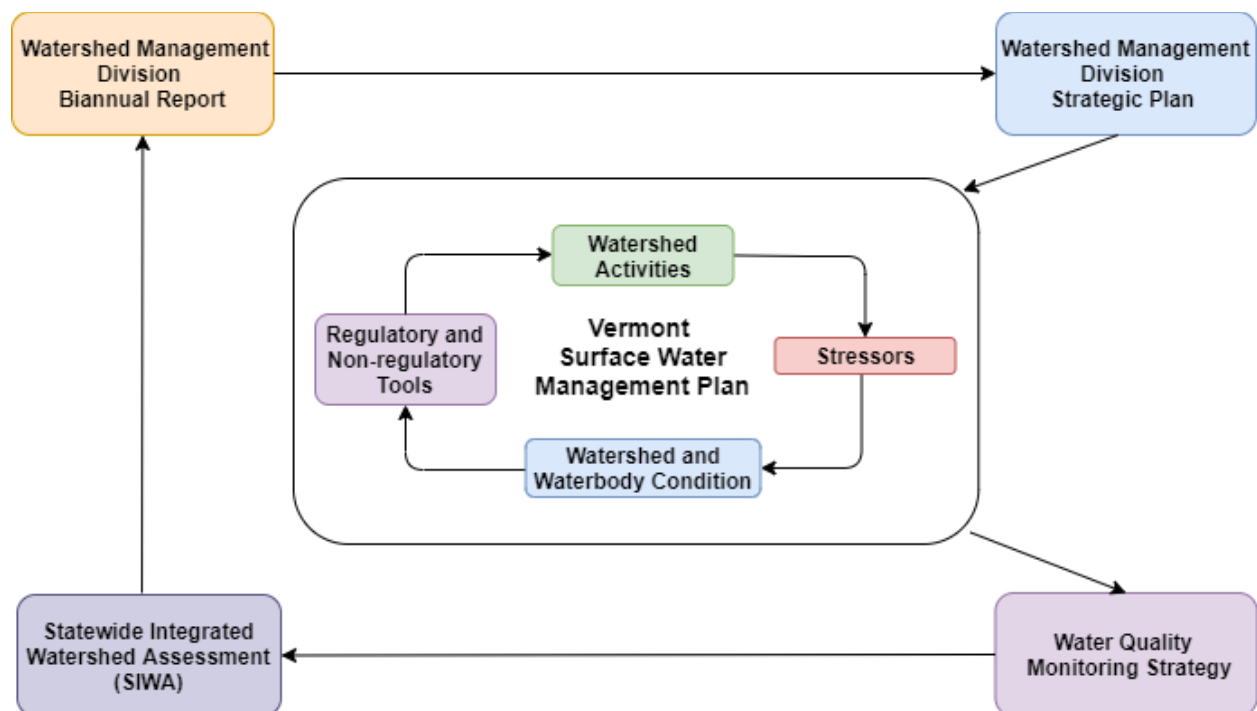
Vision: To achieve full support of both healthy ecosystems and public uses in all Vermont's surface waters.

Goals:

1. **Protect** Vermont’s very high quality or “special” waters from deleterious change over the long-term through proactive protection tools, such as reclassification and protective easements.
2. **Maintain** the current high quality of Vermont’s surface waters through regulations and permitting, technical assistance, and outreach.
3. **Enhance and Restore** the condition of Vermont’s surface waters by implementing regulations, and targeting technical, outreach, and funding resources.

The Watershed Management Division, in managing Vermont’s surface waters, works to identify and protect our very high quality waters, and the land-based activities that degrade surface waters; assess the relevant impact of those stressors on waterbody and watershed health; and mitigate that impact through regulatory actions, technical assistance and outreach, funding programs, and sound policy and management decisions informed by monitoring and assessment results. Taken together, this adaptive management process forms the basis for Vermont’s Surface Water Management Strategy, which is depicted in Figure 2.

FIGURE 2. THE WATERSHED MANAGEMENT DIVISION’S SURFACE WATER MANAGEMENT STRATEGY



The Surface Water Management Plan, at the diagram’s core, describes the various surface water stressors, the Division’s associated monitoring and assessment programs and mitigation activities, such as regulations, permitting, technical assistance, and any gaps in our ability to effectively protect and restore surface waters. A key strategy included in this strategic plan is to update the Surface Water Management Plan, which will include comprehensively evaluating existing stressors and considering the addition of new ones, like climate change and

contaminants of emerging concern (CECs), as well as identifying gaps in addressing them, such as inadequate buffers.

Working outward to the diagram's perimeter and clockwise from the bottom right corner, the Division's Water Quality Monitoring Strategy describes the monitoring and assessment programs that measure the extent to which stressors are degrading surface waters. Integrated Watershed Assessment, which is both an assessment of surface water condition as well as a characterization of relative watershed and sub-watershed condition statewide based on an assessment of landscape, biological, hydrological, geomorphological, and water quality condition, serves as the foundation for the Division's decision-making and evaluation of the effectiveness of our core mitigation activities. The Watershed Management Division's Biannual Report describes the status and trends of Vermont's surface waters as well as our progress in achieving water resource protection and restoration goals. It also reports on our specific accomplishments, including strategic plan milestones, over the two-year timeframe.

In addition, the Division prepares an annual Results Based Accountability (RBA) Report for the Vermont State Legislature as required by Act 186. The RBA framework measures how well an agency, department, division, or program is performing based on the following questions: (1) How much was done? (2) How well was it done? (3) Is anyone better off? The Division's RBA performance measures reflect the Division's effort in implementing its mission to manage Vermont's surface waters efficiently and effectively.

Section 2: Two-Year Strategy

The six objectives described below, and their corresponding strategies, will guide the Division's efforts over the next two years and provide a measure of our success in implementing this strategic plan. They are informed by thoughtful discussions with each program in the Division, guided by the question: *what do we need to better accomplish our mission?* They also reflect staff responses to more pointed questions fielded at the Division annual meeting in December 2020. We also asked for and received responses specific to gaps in our surface water management plan, which will be addressed under the first objective of the strategic plan.

While the objectives may not always be measurable, particularly when viewed independent of the strategies and metrics, they serve as unifying themes under which the strategies are organized. Those strategies, in some cases, are incremental steps toward a longer-term goal – for example, improving accessibility of the Division's data. For all strategies, one or more staff are identified as responsible for implementing the strategy, and where appropriate, metrics and next steps add clarity and accountability.

Objective 1: Identify and address gaps in our holistic management of surface waters and their watersheds.

The Vermont Surface Water Management Plan describes the Division's framework for managing surface waters through the identification and mitigation of stressors that affect ecosystem health, water quality, and uses of Vermont's surface waters, as well as for

identifying and addressing gaps in our resource management. Mitigating stressors, rather than individual pollutants caused by stressors, seeks to remedy the source of pollution, not simply the impacts from it. The Division's use of adaptive management relies on monitoring and assessment results to inform and evaluate our actions and priorities.

Strategy 1a: Update Vermont's Surface Water Management Plan to reflect new and or emerging stressors such as CECs and climate change, and gaps in our management tools such as inadequate buffers. This plan is the resource-focused component of our strategic planning efforts, and, as such, is where we need to evaluate and prioritize the gaps and opportunities to better manage our water resources and watersheds. The plan will be updated through a comprehensive and inclusive process.

Metric(s): Vermont's Surface Water Management Plan is updated; presented to staff through a brown bag and included in on-boarding document; and integrated into the Division communications plan by January 2022.

Responsible: MAP Manager

Next step(s): Gather input from Division staff on the surface water stressors; their relative importance; how we monitor, assess, and mitigate their impacts; and gaps in our ability to address them.

Strategy 1b: Develop a Statewide Integrated Watershed Assessment (SIWA) that characterizes relative watershed and sub-watershed condition in Vermont based on an assessment of landscape, biological, hydrological, geomorphological, and water quality condition. SIWA will serve as a predictive tool to support decision-making and prioritization for monitoring, assessment, and management.

Metric(s): SIWA is operational, accessible, and integrated into appropriate decision-making processes by January 2022.

Responsible: MAP Manager

Strategy 1c: Improve cross-programmatic participation, coordination, and communication during 303(d) assessment and listing cycle to ensure a more comprehensive assessment of stressed and impaired waters as well as an evaluation of restoration and protection actions.

Metric(s): Implementation and evaluation of the new assessment and listing process for the 2022 listing cycle by September 2022.

Responsible: MAP Water Quality TMDL Coordinator

Next step(s): Develop a detailed, thorough, and inclusive process and timeline for assessment and listing cycle by September 2021.

Strategy 1d: Develop a comprehensive plan to increase protection of Vermont's very high quality waters and exceptional wetlands through means such as reclassification and designation, and evaluate and improve the relevant processes and procedures.

Metric(s): A plan containing a coordinated approach and timeline for reclassifying surface waters by March 2022.

Responsible: Division Director and resource-specific Program Managers

Objective 2: Identify and pursue opportunities to improve cross-programmatic collaboration.

The Division's organizational structure and mission are founded on the principle that we are most efficient and effective when we manage surface waters using a comprehensive, holistic watershed approach. This relies on cross-programmatic collaboration in all that we do – from monitoring and assessment to permitting. The strategies identified below, along with corresponding metrics to aid in tracking our progress, support this objective.

Strategy 2a: Conduct joint site visits for monitoring, assessment, and permitting fieldwork.

Metric(s): Twelve cross-programmatic site visits conducted annually within the Division.

Responsible: Program Managers

Next Step(s): Program Managers identify which programs to coordinate with and why.

Strategy 2b: Develop and maintain a calendar of brown bag presentations and cross-programmatic meetings as a means of informal information sharing between programs.

Metric(s): Six brown bag presentations offered annually; two cross-programmatic meetings per program annually.

Responsible: Program Managers

Strategy 2c: Improve data management and accessibility across the Division.

Metric(s): Data and database inventory completed by February 2022.

Responsible: BOSS Environmental Analyst

Next step(s): Establish a data management workgroup to catalog existing databases and identify opportunities to improve data management and accessibility.

Strategy 2d: Assess opportunities to develop and issue integrated permits to increase efficiency and effectiveness of resource management and diversify staff knowledge and skills. This could include integrating permitting, regulations, or permits.

Responsible: Division Director and Program Managers

Next step(s): By July 2021, establish a multi-sector permitting work group with BOSS, Stormwater, Wetlands, Rivers, Wastewater, Lakes, and CAFO staff.

Objective 3: Increase and improve outreach and communications.

Division staff have limited time and resources to devote to outreach and communications with external audiences. To be efficient and effective, the investments we make in creating new and or updating existing communication tools and materials must be coordinated, timely, and targeted to achieve the specific objectives identified.

Strategy 3a: Create an outreach and communications coordinator position. Identify an individual to dedicate a minimum of 0.25 FTE to coordinate outreach and communications for the Watershed Management Division and to assist programs with development of outreach materials.

Responsible: Division Director

Strategy 3b: Establish a cross-programmatic communications team to identify needs and provide content for the Division's outreach efforts, which will also support Department and Agency communications. Each program will identify a representative to participate on this team.

Responsible: Outreach and Communications Coordinator

Strategy 3c: Develop and implement an annual outreach and communications plan for the Watershed Management Division.

Metric(s): Develop annual communications plan including key messages, target audience(s), tactics, and timeline for implementation by November 2021.

Responsible: Outreach and Communications Coordinator

Objective 4: Achieve greater regulatory compliance through Watershed Management Division-led efforts as well as collaborative efforts with the Environmental Compliance and Enforcement Division (ECD). Effective and timely compliance is integral to the overall effectiveness of our permitting programs.

Strategy 4a: Maintain a dedicated point-person for compliance coordination in the Division and with ECD and define responsibilities.

Responsible: Division Director

Strategy 4b: Develop a Memorandum of Understanding with ECD to define roles and responsibilities and communication pathways with respect to compliance and enforcement issues.

Responsible: Compliance Coordinator

Next step(s): Describe MOU purpose and outline scope.

Strategy 4c: Develop and implement program specific enforcement priorities through the use of strategic overlays and standardized criteria.

Metric: Each program has a strategic overlay by November 2021.

Responsible: Program Managers

Strategy 4d: Identify and address compliance and enforcement training needs and cross-training opportunities, such as de-escalation training, use of strategic overlays, BEAR, sampling chain-of-custody, and appropriate uses of citations.

Metric(s): Updates to skills matrix, including evaluation of necessary compliance and enforcement trainings, and how best to meet training needs by January 2022.

Responsible: Program Managers

Strategy 4e: Identify opportunities to advance program priorities through highlighting selected enforcement actions through outreach and communications.

Responsible: Program Managers

Objective 5: Incorporate environmental justice principles.

With training, tools, and resources to better understand and incorporate environmental justice into our work being developed by the Agency and Administration, we can begin considering how we might apply them in evaluating our resource management and funding decisions in the Division, and the impact those decisions have on under-represented communities in Vermont. To what extent are our resource protection and restoration efforts, stream reclassification, for example, directed by those who have the time, knowledge, and skills to develop a petition? Or in the case of funding, are we equitably distributing resources or do our grant programs tend to reward those with the resources to develop a strong grant application? These are two examples where we can work to identify unconscious biases or structural inequities as a first step toward addressing them.

Strategy 5a: Implement guidance provided by Environmental Justice Coordinator and support staff attendance at environmental justice trainings.

Responsible: Division Director and Program Managers

Strategy 5b: Identify unconscious biases and structural inequities that may exist in programs, such as in management and funding decisions, and strategies to address them, with assistance from a trained facilitator and knowledge of underserved communities in Vermont.

Metric(s): Program strategic plans contain at least one strategy aimed at reducing unconscious biases and structural inequities.

Responsible: Program Managers

Next step(s): With assistance from a facilitator, Programs discuss and document where biases and structural inequities may exist in their work.

Objective 6: Restore Operational Stability.

Operational stability was one of the main concerns expressed by both managers and staff during the strategic planning process. While this entire strategic plan is aimed at aligning and strengthening the work of the Division, identifying and pursuing specific strategies to address the loss of state revenue and positions, as well as to accommodate changes in workloads and staffing, are critical.

Strategy 6a: Pursue opportunities to stabilize and diversify revenues. Develop a comprehensive fee bill proposal that both simplifies and standardizes the fee structure and better aligns permit fees with the actual costs of permitting for consideration during the next legislative session. Continue to pursue grant funding opportunities to augment state permit funds and general funds.

Metric(s): Fee bill proposal developed by September 2021.

Responsible: Division Director and relevant Program Managers

Strategy 6b: Develop program-level strategic plans to evaluate priorities and address workloads and establish corresponding workplans.

Metric(s): Program strategic plans completed by February 2022.

Responsible: Program Managers

Strategy 6c: Identify and address training needs by updating each program-level skills matrix and developing a plan to address gaps.

Metric(s): Program skills matrix and a plan for addressing training needs completed by February 2022.

Responsible: Program Managers

Strategy 6d: Manage positions and workloads across the Division by reevaluating position assignments and classifications as new vacancies occur; seeking opportunities to partner with external organizations (e.g., Lake Champlain Sea Grant and ECO AmeriCorps); and continuing to pursue necessary classified positions and associated funding to support them.

Responsible: Division Director

Accountability

A strategic plan is only effective if it's implemented. While metrics provide a measure of accountability, as a Division, we must also hold one another accountable for the plan's

implementation. It will undoubtedly take a collective effort to implement the strategies identified, but the effort is integral to our success, to our ability to move forward, with purpose and intention, in pursuit of our mission: To manage Vermont's surface water resources efficiently and effectively through a comprehensive, integrated, and holistic watershed-based system. We will review implementation progress as a monthly element during our Division management team meetings, and report on overall progress at our Division-wide meetings.