



## Missisquoi River Basin Association

*Our goal is to restore and maintain the ecological integrity of the Missisquoi River system so that the uses and values desired by the community are supported by the river and quality of its water.*

January 17, 2014

Kari Dolan  
Department of Environmental Conservation  
State of Vermont  
1 National Life Drive, Main 2  
Montpelier, VT 05620-3520

Dear Ms. Dolan:

The Missisquoi River Basin Association (MRBA) appreciates the opportunity to comment on Vermont DEC's draft Proposal for a Clean Lake Champlain document as part of the on-going effort to develop a new phosphorus TMDL for Lake Champlain. We work closely with the Friends of Northern Lake Champlain and have taken portions of their finely drafted letter that we feel align with the work and mission of the MRBA.

As a member-driven organization that has been working on pollution issues in the Missisquoi River Basin since our inception of 1996, we have seen first-hand the degradation of the watershed caused by the increased nutrient loads from our landscape due to changing land-use policies and activities. We believe that the three strongest pieces in the current proposal that will have the greatest positive impact water quality are the:

- ✓ Improvements to the Accepted Agricultural Practices and engagement of the small farms
- ✓ Proposed TS4 permit and the improving municipal stormwater practices
- ✓ Requirement for all farms to stabilize field gully erosion on agricultural lands

We are extremely concerned, however, that the proposal perpetuates the public's sense that addressing water quality is solely the responsibility of the state and does not identify any clear roles for federal partners, watershed groups, or individuals. It will be critical for everyone to come to the table in order to achieve our shared water quality goals. We know there can be no improvement in water quality without the on-the-ground projects that improve the waters flowing into the Lake throughout the entire watershed.

We are also concerned that at this point in the process there are no federal or state commitments for funding the implementation of the numerous initiatives outlined in the draft Proposal and that funding is unlikely to be discussed by the administration and legislature until next year. Vermonters deserve to be made aware of the magnitude of the financial commitment that will be necessary to fulfill DEC's draft Proposal to EPA. Further, DEC needs to be able to compare and contrast for Vermont taxpayers the draft Proposal to what an EPA enforced cleanup will cost and will realistically deliver in terms of water quality results. Currently, funding for projects that improve the waters flowing into Lake Champlain comes in a variety of different State and

Federal programs, all of which have limits and constraints which affects their ability to be truly effective in reducing the nutrient loads going into Lake Champlain. For example:

- The Agency of Agriculture typically receives significantly larger annual appropriations from the legislature for barnyard improvements through its BMP program than for its farm agronomic practices for cropland conservation, even though barnyards represent less than 1% of the phosphorus load being delivered to Lake Champlain annually and cropland is more than 35%.
- VTrans' Better Back Roads Program has approximately \$300,000 annually that is allocated in small grants of \$10,000 to municipalities statewide, resulting in some ditch improvements, but is generally insufficient to address under-sized culverts that can be some of the most significant sources of polluted run-off from gravel roads.
- VT DEC's Ecosystem Restoration Program is a statewide program, funded by the Capital Bill at \$2,000,000, is becoming an administrative nightmare for organizations attempting to implement projects, because of the structure of the grant requirements, and the slow pace at which the DEC Business Office issues payments on the invoices submitted.
- The U.S. Department of Agriculture's Natural Resources Conservation Service, has between \$4 and \$7 million to allocate annually for barnyard improvements and cropland conservation, however, many months can pass between when a farmer enrolls in their programs and when the projects are actually implemented on the group.
- The Watershed Grants that are funded by the license plate fund from VT DEC and the Vermont Department of Fish & Wildlife makes about \$200,000 available annually; these grants are very competitive and fund implementation projects only up to \$15,000.
- The Lake Champlain Basin Program tends to focus its most significant resources on applied research projects, and offers only small, competitively sought grants of up to \$15,000 for implementation.

In addition, there are a number of technical and programmatic initiatives that were not included in the draft Proposal that we think need to be part of the larger solutions-based plan to achieve water quality in Lake Champlain. Listed in no particular order, these are:

- ✓ Develop a water quality "cap and trade" program that would require nutrient loads from farms not increase even as farm may convert cropland from hay to corn;
- ✓ Require mandatory licensing for custom manure spreaders/operators;
- ✓ Make significant investments on farm and field practices that have been known to reduce soil and nutrient loss. These investments could include, but should not be limited to:
  - Increase technical exchanges and educational opportunities between farmers.
  - Increase annual funding available for crop and soil management practices through the Agency of Agriculture's Farm Agronomic Practices (FAP) program.
  - Increase funding for new technologies and treatment of farm run-off that reduce phosphorous loads to lakes and streams.

- Increase low till, no-till, and manure injection practices on all farms in the Champlain Valley, by continuing to make cost-share available to support equipment purchase and practice implementation.
- Encourage land and trading/buying in areas that are prone to significant flooding.
- Compensate landowners to implement, in perpetuity, agronomic practices that will control non-point nutrient runoff from the most sensitive areas of the landscape, as identified in the *2011 Missisquoi Bay Critical Source Area* funded by the Lake Champlain Basin Program..
- ✓ Explicitly recognize and incorporate strategies for public education and outreach to better inform residents about their watershed and the individual responsibility;
- ✓ Restore pass thru funding from the Section 319 grant program to regional and local watershed group that are playing a significant role in watersheds throughout Lake Champlain;
- ✓ Create a net-zero or no runoff incentive stormwater program for landowners, existing businesses and industrial complexes;
- ✓ Ensure long-term funding for the USGS flow gages in order to properly monitor progress;
- ✓ Incorporate active stream bank stabilization strategies in the discussion of river channel stability, in order to address the rate of stream bank erosion to be consistent with the load the lake can assimilate, without compromising on the ultimate goal of achieving channel stability. We are extremely concerned the streambanks represent a high portion of the phosphorus load to the lake and the draft Proposal does not include any active strategies to address this major pollution source.

There is a lot of work to be done, and it is important that the work is done in the most critically impacted areas there should be a catalog of all the resources we currently spent on water quality improvement and determine if the money is being spent wisely or if we should re-distribute and re-prioritize what we are funding. Any plan is only as strong as the resources to fund it/move it along. We think that Vermont should establish a *Clean Water Fund*, modeled on the structure of Efficiency Vermont. This would be established to implement on-the-ground projects to reduce non-point source pollution from developed and agricultural lands.

Thank you again for allowing us to comment on Vermont DEC's draft Proposal for a Clean Lake Champlain document as part of the on-going effort to develop a new phosphorus TMDL for Lake Champlain. If you have any questions about our comments or would like some clarification, please do not hesitate to contact Alisha Sawyer, Coordinator, Missisquoi River Basin Association.

Sincerely,

The Missisquoi River Basin Association