

An Overview of the Vermont Water Quality Standards

As required by the federal Clean Water Act, the [Vermont Water Quality Standards](#) establish designated uses, which must be protected and maintained. In Vermont, the designated uses are:

- Aquatic biota and wildlife that may utilize or are present in the waters;
- Aquatic habitat to support aquatic biota, wildlife, or plant life;
- The use of waters for swimming and other primary contact recreation;
- The use of waters for boating and related recreational uses;
- The use of waters for fishing and related recreational uses;
- The use of waters for the enjoyment of aesthetic conditions;
- The use of the water for public water source; and
- The use of water for irrigation of crops and other agricultural uses.

A surface water is classified for each designated use. The class of the water determines the management objectives and the minimum water quality criteria. There are four possible classes of Vermont surface waters: Class A(1) – waters in their natural condition that have significant ecological value; Class B(1) – waters in which one or more uses are of demonstrably and consistently higher quality than Class B(2) waters; Class B(2) – good quality waters that support all designated uses; and A(2) – waters that are suitable for a public water source with filtration and disinfection or other required treatment.

The state legislature established that all waters above 2,500 are Class A(1), unless they are a public water source, in which case they are Class A(2). All other waters are Class B(2) unless they have been reclassified. In 2017, all surface waters in the wilderness areas of Green Mountain National Forest were reclassified to A(1), along with three streams in or near Ripton, Vermont in 2022 for the designated uses of aquatic biota and wildlife, aquatic habitat, and aesthetics.

If a surface water meets or exceeds the minimum water quality criteria for its designated use and class – A(1), B(1), B(2), or A(2) – it is a high quality water. A surface water may be high quality for only some parameters (for example, a surface water may meet minimum criteria for all parameters except for total phosphorus). If it meets the minimum criteria, then the designated use is an existing use. Existing uses must always be protected and maintained. If it does not meet the minimum criteria, the surface water is impaired, and a restoration plan must be developed and implemented.

In addition to designated uses and the minimum water quality criteria necessary to protect and maintain them, the Vermont Water Quality Standards include the Antidegradation Policy. The Clean Water Act requires that states establish an Antidegradation Policy in their Water Quality Standards and the methodology to implement it. The Antidegradation Policy ensures the protection of water quality in outstanding resource waters (“Tier 3”); the protection and maintenance of water quality in high quality waters (“Tier 2”); protection of existing uses (“Tier 1”).

States are required to update their water quality standards at least every three years. This process is called a triennial review. In Vermont, updates to the Water Quality Standards are proposed through rulemaking. Once a rule is final, it then gets submitted to the Environmental Protection Agency for approval.

For more information on the Vermont Water Quality Standards, visit <https://dec.vermont.gov/watershed/map/assessment/waterqualitystandards>.