



APPROVED MINUTES
WRC Transportation Committee
September 23rd, 2024
4:00 p.m.

Members Present: Stephan Chait, Chair, Nick Morgan, James Bressor, Rick Cowan, Erik Moses, Christine Howe

Staff present: Colin Bratton, Margo Ghia

Guests: Jens Hilke (ANR), Rep. Mollie Burke, Jim Pinkerton

Meeting convened at 4:02 p.m.

Changes to Agenda: None

Minutes: Motion to accept the minutes of 6/10/24 was made by Commissioner Morgan, seconded by Commissioner Chait. Minutes from 6/10/24 meeting were approved unanimously.

Aquatic and Terrestrial Wildlife Crossings Presentation: Jens Hilke, a Conservation Wildlife Planner for the Agency of Natural Resources presented to the committee on the statewide aquatic and terrestrial wildlife passage program. Transportation infrastructure, including roads, bridges and culverts, create significant barriers to the movement of Vermont's wildlife around their natural habitat. The Agency of Natural Resources together with the Agency of Transportation work to identify priority wildlife corridors across the state and incorporate wildlife crossing strategies into infrastructure projects. One such example is the Route 9 wildlife bridge in Searsburg, which connects two sections of the Green Mountain National Forest separated by the busy state highway.

The Agency of Natural Resources Community Wildlife programs aims to encourage towns to incorporate aquatic and terrestrial wildlife passage into the planning and construction of municipal transportation projects. There are a variety of tools available for towns to identify important local habitat blocks and barriers, most importantly ANR's Vermont biofinder tool. The biofinder tool maps all forest blocks, stream corridors as well as development density and transportation and ranks habitat and barriers by priority, providing towns with the information necessary to identify and prioritize connectivity blocks.

Many of Vermont's approximately 40,000 species of wildlife move large distances across the landscape each day. A male bobcat may travel as much as 19 miles a day, an otter up to 30 miles and black bears are known to travel hundreds of miles over weeks and months. The system of state and town highways that crisscross Vermont's forests present a significant danger to animals while they travel across their home range. Collisions between vehicles and animals endanger both the health and sustainability of Vermont's ecosystem as well as cause an estimated \$1.4 billion dollars in damage each year.

Planning for and implementing wildlife crossings is critical to reducing the impact of our transportation system on the ecosystem. Preserving linkages between habitat blocks provide animals with the connections they need to move safely around the landscape. Studies show that even small connections such as hedges or a row of trees provide animals with the natural cover they need. Incorporating designs for animals into culvert and bridge replacement projects is another important way to provide critical links for wildlife. Increasing the size of culverts and ensuring they have a natural bottom, or additional plantings on bridge abutments can make a huge difference for Vermont's wildlife. Jens is available to work with Vermont towns on planning for habitat connectivity through the Community Wildlife program. Interested towns should reach out to him at Jens.Hilke@vermont.gov.

Northeast Transportation and Wildlife Conference: Several Windham Regional Commission staff attended the Northeast Transportation and Wildlife Conference in Groton, CT this September. NETWC provides a forum for DOTs, City and Town staff, Regional Planning Commissions, a variety of conservation organizations and other stakeholders across the Northeast U.S and Eastern Canada to discuss challenges, strategies, solutions and innovations to ensure that transportation infrastructure causes as little disruption as possible to the environment.

There were a variety of projects discussed at the conference, ranging from largescale coastal marsh restoration and interstate bridge projects from Departments of Transportation to community led habitat mapping projects in small rural New England towns.

One project particularly relevant to Southern Vermont is ongoing work in Berkshire County, Massachusetts to identify, map and replace undersized stream culverts that create barriers for fish and other aquatic organisms. The group known as the Berkshire Clean, Cold and Connected initiative is a coalition of towns, the Berkshire Regional Planning Commission, Massachusetts Fish and Wildlife, and a variety of watershed conservation groups in Western Massachusetts. Undersized or improperly situated culverts in streams can prevent the regular flow of water or create a ledge that fish and other organisms are unable to pass. This prevents these animals from moving between the different stream stages necessary for their survival and reproduction, including stopping fish from accessing higher order cold water habitats during the summer months. These barriers also fragment aquatic organism populations, making these species less resilient overall.

The initiative uses a variety of available resources to identify the culverts which present the greatest challenge to the overall health of the ecosystem and work with municipalities to replace them utilizing a variety of aquatic connectivity specific funding sources. This includes evaluating and mapping stream culverts for connectivity and identifying priority aquatic organism habitats in the region. In many cases, undersized stream culverts that are detrimental to the health of aquatic organism populations are also the culverts most likely to fail during stormwater events, allowing towns to address both transportation resiliency and improve the health of aquatic organisms in one project. Southern Vermont shares both a border as well as many geographic, cultural and ecological characteristics with Berkshire County, Massachusetts. Most towns in the Berkshires are small, mountain towns that share many of the challenges with funding for infrastructure projects as the Windham Region. This program provides a model for rural New England towns to improve transportation resiliency while also addressing the overall health of our aquatic ecosystems.

Next Meeting Scheduled: 4:00pm October 14th, 2024.

Meeting adjourned approximately 5:15 p.m.

Respectfully submitted, Colin Bratton, Staff