

MPC Update for June 2018
By Alex Barrett and Nancy Patch

Models of engagement in Vermont

The Membership and Policy Council is addressing a variety of topics including membership outreach, student engagement, events, and policy. Here we provide a couple of examples, offering a slice of context for the relevancy of our mission, how member advocacy affects policy, and what a strong Forest Stewards Guild can accomplish.

Policy Statements as guidance

In 2018, the Vermont legislature proposed amending its landmark land use law, Act 250, to reflect important new considerations for landscape connectivity and the impacts of parcel fragmentation on a variety of ecosystem and economic services. The legislative proposal would have required forest habitat blocks (as defined by a state-level analysis) and connectivity blocks to receive specific consideration for certain larger-scale development projects. Based on the Guild's recent policy statement on this topic, Alex offered testimony to the Senate Natural Resources and Energy Committee on April 11. He spoke in favor of the legislation – arguing for the values larger forest blocks and forest connectivity provide- for wildlife, for forest ecosystem processes, and also for the human dimensions of forest management. These larger, connected blocks are the places we forest management professionals love to work, and they are the primary providers of the forest values that give Vermont its unique set of attributes and which attract people, investment, and tourism to the State. Having a Guild policy statement in place gave Alex a platform on which to stand and the coincidental timing of the legislative debate and the release of the Guild's Statement made it all come together. As Alex put it, "Sitting down in front of a Committee was a daunting prospect- something I had never done before- I was really glad to have worked on this Policy Statement beforehand and to be able to immediately apply it to something very real." The proposed legislation marched into the final days of the legislative session with strong support. Unfortunately, it fell short in the waning hours of the session- so Alex will likely have an opportunity next year to dust off his comments and again use the Guild's Statement for guidance as we strive to maintain and enhance large forest blocks and connectivity- both in practice on the ground and at the legislative level.

Working locally, to make a global difference

Forests are being recognized for their important role in climate mitigation. Vermont is among many states currently attempting to chart a course to reduce its greenhouse gas impacts over the next few decades. As a member of the Vermont Climate Action Commission, Robert Turner is tasked—along with 20 other members across a range of agencies and professions—with developing a set of administrative and legislative recommendations that will move the state towards the energy and GHG reduction goals stated in its comprehensive energy plan. The concept that plants capture carbon from the atmosphere and store it in trees and soil is simply not appreciated to the extent it deserves. This elevates the discussion around sequestration as an important climate strategy. The final recommendations will include support for carbon-building agricultural practices, pilot carbon offset projects, urban tree planting, smart growth policies, and fragmentation monitoring.

Sharing what we've learned and continued learning

In May 2018, a workshop was held to promote a Land Ethics Discussion among conservation leaders in Vermont. This facilitated discussion was led in part by Dan Kilborn (FSG member and VLT forester), and sponsored by The Vermont Woodlands Association, VT F&W, VT FPR and Vermont Land Trust (VLT). The workshop was based on Dan's and other's experience in The Land Ethics Leaders program with the Aldo Leopold Foundation. The event was hosted by The Green Mountain Club, now led by Mike Debonis (FSG member and past ED). Some of the attendees were also Guild members and the discussion included the acknowledgement of the First-Duty Principle of the Guild, that our first duty is to the forest.

There are so many ways in which sharing what we've learned, listening to learn more, and using the experience and tools we have, can and will make a difference. The key is for us to recognize that we are the vehicles and stay engaged. Thanks to all who work, share, advocate, learn, and create change for the good of the forests.