

From the Secretary's Desk: It Is By Standing Together That We Will Protect Lake Champlain

By Secretaries Deb Markowitz, Brian Searles, Chuck Ross and Lawrence Miller



This Earth Day, we can take pride that Vermonters are working together – farmers, loggers, businesses, citizens, and local, state and federal officials in every corner of the state – to ensure that we protect and restore Lake Champlain and all of the state's waters. Not only is this necessary to continue our tradition of protecting our environment and quality of life, but it is essential if we are to continue to enjoy swimming, fishing, boating, and viewing wildlife on our beautiful lake, as well as using it for drinking. Those of us who have been charged with overseeing the agencies of state government know that we can clean up the lake and also have a vibrant working landscape of forests and farms, a modern, reliable transportation system, and a thriving, prosperous economy. Indeed, Vermont's future prosperity depends on our success.

Three years ago, EPA directed the State of Vermont to write a new plan for reducing pollution into Lake Champlain. Since that time, we have engaged in an unprecedented level of effort and coordination to develop an approach that will reverse the trend of increasing pollution and to restore the lake to a healthy state. Working together, and listening to Vermonters, our agencies designed a proposal based on the best scientific information and tools available to significantly reduce the polluted runoff flowing into our streams, rivers, ponds and lakes, with a major focus on Lake Champlain.

Later this spring, Governor Shumlin will submit this plan to the United States Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). Once the EPA approves our proposal, we will work with the Vermont General Assembly to put in place programmatic and regulatory changes and to deploy the resources needed to implement the plan.

We learned over the past decades that we will succeed in cleaning up Lake Champlain only by addressing pollution from all the different sources, including farms, businesses, homes and roads. For instance, we know that we can do a better job of improving farm field practices. If we can keep soil and nutrients on farm fields, we not only reduce pollution but can also reduce fertilizer costs and increase farm production. Our road systems are another source of polluted runoff that we have ignored for too long. Changes to road, ditch and culvert construction practices can make a substantial difference in reducing erosion that flows into our streams and rivers and can also help our roads endure the increased intensity and frequency of storm events we are experiencing.

Over the years we developed better ways to ensure that stormwater running off parking lots, driveways, lawns, roofs and roads in our towns is slowed, captured and filtered before it reaches streams and rivers. We now need to implement these techniques -- rain gardens, vegetated ditches, stormwater ponds, green roofs. These and similar features not only reduce water pollution but they beautify a community and reduce damage from high flows during snowmelt and rainstorms. Finally, we learned from Irene that we need to pay attention to how we live and work, along and in our rivers. Much of the erosion and pollution that resulted from those floods could be avoided in the future if we reconnect our rivers to their floodplains by giving them more room to move.

Cleaning up Lake Champlain is a big job. State government cannot do this alone. That is why we are working closely with our federal agency partners, with our Congressional delegation and with Vermont's local governments, businesses and regional agencies. We owe a special thanks to Senator Leahy who provides continued leadership, bringing federal funds to Lake Champlain; and to Senator Sanders and Congressman Welch who are also lending critical support.

Part of what makes this moment in time so unique, and why we are so optimistic about the future success of this plan, is that so many Vermonters are joined in a common effort to clean up Lake Champlain. None of this work is cheap, or easy, but it is possible and will get easier over time. The benefits include clean water, a strong economy, and resilient communities.

Visit watershedmanagement.vt.gov/erp/champlain/ for the latest information on the Lake Champlain cleanup plan, and to share your thoughts.