



Annual Report 2025

Celebrating 30 Years of Community-based Forestry



Letter from David

Putting Forest Ecosystem Health First— Celebrating 30 Years of Family Forestry in Vermont’s Center-West Ecoregion

“To dwell in a qualitative sense is a basic condition of humanity. When we identify with a place, we dedicate ourselves to a way of being in the world. Therefore, dwelling demands something from us, as well as from our places. We have to open our mind, and the places have to offer rich possibilities for identification.”

– Christian Norberg-Schulz, *The Concept of Dwelling* (1985)

Dear Friends,

I spent my early days growing up in Montpelier, Vermont. The house my parents had built in the mid-1950s at 4 Walker Terrace was in the rural outskirts characterized by hay-able pastures and young woodlands. Our house came with a large yard where my father planted Norway spruce transplants purchased from the Vermont State Tree Nursery. Our land was bordered by a young hardwood forest where my brother Tom built a tree fort. Our next-door neighbors had one child, Peter, and we played in that forest all of the time. Pete’s father was Art Heitman. Art was a forester. In his younger days, Art was the first County Forester hired by Vermont State Forester Perry Merrill. Art was the first county forester in the United States. He had his pick of Vermont counties and he chose Addison.

As the youngest of six kids, I found it exceptionally fun to hang out with the Heitmans whenever I could. Art had a snappy Saab, and it was a blast to ride in it. On rainy days we often visited his Vermont Forests and Parks office located right next door to the capitol building. Pete and I outfitted ourselves with all sorts of Smokey Bear-aphernalia, from calendars and bookmarks to posters and notebooks. Periodically Art would take us to Camel’s Hump State Park and Little River State Park to visit ongoing forest resource management projects. We attended the Lumberjack Roundup at Lake Dunmore. I was 100% sold on industrial forestry, Tree Farming, and Wise Use at six years old. What was not to love?

Most of the second decade of my life was spent living in Los Gatos, California. We moved there in 1962 before IBM had arrived. It was a paradise and we

helped pave it. My parents had sold their Montpelier house for \$25,000 and replaced it with a brand-new house in Los Gatos for \$33,000. Forestry was nowhere to be seen in my California life.

This changed in 1968 when my father was asked by the National Life home office to return to Montpelier to create a mutual fund. At 18 and 15 years of age respectively, my brother Larry and I drove our VW bug across the country, camping and hiking all the way. That summer was the beginning of my reintroduction to being a Vermonter again. I was back in deep connection with the Heitmans and many of the other friends and joys I had experienced as a young child. I loved Vermont’s way of things and her misty and moist forests with diverse hardwood trees. I knew I wanted to stay and grow old here.

Fast forward through my senior year spent back in California, a one-year stint at St. Michaels College, a draft number of 331, freedom to travel to Europe and Ireland instead of Vietnam, and then graduating from the University of Vermont’s Forest Management Program. By 1976, I was working at the Vermont Department of Forests, Parks, and Recreation as a Tree Improvement Technician, followed by Assistant County Forester and Statelands Forester, and in 1990, the Addison County Forester. I had died and gone to heaven. I was a certified Tree Farm Inspector and was soon awarded as the top Cooperative Forest Management (CFM) Forester in the 22 northeastern states. I was fully immersed in the existing forestry paradigm.

My work got me associated with Middlebury College in general and Chris Klyza and Stephen Trombulak in particular. In 1995, they insisted I go to a book-signing

event at Vermont College about two stone throws away from my first home in Montpelier. The book was entitled *Saving Nature's Legacy: Protecting and Restoring Biodiversity*, and the reading was by Reed F. Noss. That event changed the trajectory of my life in ways that I had never anticipated. On the way home from the reading, I pondered the name of a new organization. One I wrote down in my copy of the new book was VERMONT F.O.R.E.S.T.S! – Forest Organization for Restorative, Environmentally Sustainable, Timberland Systems. On the way home, in Bristol, I stopped by the grocery store and spied milk under the brand of “Vermont Family Farms”. Why not “Vermont Family Forests” as a 501(c)3 organization name?

Over the thirty years since that auspicious event in Montpelier, Vermont Family Forests has cultivated an organization that puts forest ecosystem health first. We have had a lot of help from many local and global sources. We have been inspired by Aldo Leopold, who wrote that *“Health is the capacity of land for self-renewal. Conservation is our effort to understand and preserve that capacity.”* Wendell Berry inspired us as well, with such words as, *“The two great ruiners of land are ignorance and economic constraint.”*

And Stan Rowe, a forester from British Columbia, gave us a boot in the pants in 2004 when “A Manifesto For Earth” was posthumously published by his co-author Ted Mosquin. They wrote:

CORE PRINCIPLES

Principle 1: The Ecosphere is the center of value for humanity.

Principle 2: The creativity and productivity of Earth’s ecosystems depend on their integrity.

Principle 3: The Earth-centered worldview is supported by natural history.

Principle 4: Ecocentric ethics are grounded in awareness of our place in Nature.

Principle 5: An Ecocentric worldview values diversity of ecosystems and cultures.

Principle 6: Ecocentric ethics support social justice.

ACTION PRINCIPLES

Principle 7: Defend and preserve Earth’s creative potential

Principle 8: Reduce human population size

Principle 9: Reduce human consumption of Earth parts

Principle 10: Promote Ecocentric governance

Principle 11: Spread the message

At VFF we say, *If it isn’t complicated, it isn’t conservation.* This certainly applies to forest ecosystem conservation. However, if we are serious about focusing and manifesting our forest ecosystem conservation goals, a great place to focus our efforts is on the ecological commons of forests—the unenclosed elements that we-the-people hold.

We know that the conservation of ecological commons requires three things:

1. **Commons Element** (such as water) to conserve,
2. **Commoning Practices**, and
3. **Commoners** to implement, maintain, and monitor those practices over space and time.

At this point in time, Vermont Family Forests is focusing our attention and resources on four of them:

- **Water** quality
- **Wildlife** species richness
- **Air** (atmospheric carbon sequestration and storage), and
- **Forest ecosystem resilience** in the face of floods, drought, and wildfire in a rapidly changing and increasingly unpredictable climate.

If you are inspired to join us, please do. In any event, *May the forest be with you!*

David J. Brynn

David Brynn
Executive Director
Vermont Family Forests



Our Mission

Observe, understand, and preserve forest ecosystem health,

Practice forest-centered conservation that is wholistic and adaptive,

Support careful management of local family forests for ecological, economic, and social benefits, *and*

Foster a forest culture focused on community well-being, ecological resilience, and the quest of an optimal land ethic.



Observe

Colby Hill Ecological Project— 27 Years of Ecosystem Monitoring

Lester and Monique Anderson established the Colby Hill Ecological Project (CHEP) in 1998 to inventory animal and plant species in the forever-wild forests of their Lincoln lands and monitor their ecological relationships and changes over time. Vermont Family Forests is honored to now hold these lands and steward this on-going study.

In 2025, CHEP researchers monitored forest birds, grassland birds, water quality, small mammals, and large mammals. Small mammal researcher Chris Gray noted the exciting discovery of a southern bog lemming in a forest site where this species hadn't previously been recorded. The southern bog lemming is considered a "Species of Greatest Conservation Need" in Vermont's Wildlife Action Plan.

Another Species of Greatest Conservation Need—the bobolink—was recorded in the CHEP grassland bird study. Per the Stewardship Agreement for the Andersons' lands, we mow the fields to maintain habitat for grassland wildlife. Waiting until after August 15 helps ensure that ground-nesting birds will have fledged before mowing. You'll find links to the CHEP monitoring reports on our [website](#).



Southern Bog Lemming live-trapped on VFF Guthrie-Bancroft land, 2025 field season.
Photo: Chris Gray



Bobolink at VFF Wells Farm. Photo: Nick Tepper

Revisiting the Guthrie-Bancroft Wildlife Transect

In 1998, wildlife consultant Sue Morse, with the help of then-UVM graduate student Sean Lawson, established wildlife transects on each of Lester and Monique Anderson's three parcels of land in Lincoln. Since then, CHEP has monitored the transect on the largest and wildest parcel—the 470-acre Guthrie-Bancroft land—four times every year. Following Sue's methodology protocol (watching for and recording signs of black bear, bobcat, Canada lynx, mountain lion, fisher, mink, moose, river otter, and gray wolf), wildlife tracker Greg Borah has monitored the transect ever since.

In the fall of 2025, Greg walked the transect with VFF executive director David Brynn and ecologist Marc Lapin—who helped Lester and Monique establish CHEP and oversaw the research project for many years—to refresh the transect markers and record the route's GPS mapping coordinates.

During their walk, one of the many noteworthy wildlife signs they encountered was the fresh remains of a deer killed that day by one of the many hunters who request permission annually to hunt on this land. We respectfully refer to our hunting community as the “wolves,” filling the niche of large predator once occupied by gray wolves and mountain lions.

By far the most abundant wildlife signs (tracks, scratches, scat, hair, and so on) Greg has seen over the 25 years he's been walking this 4-mile transect have been those left by black bear, which account for 57% of his 243 recorded wildlife markings.



Greg Borah (left) studies the land map with Marc Lapin, as VFF executive director David Brynn looks on.



David Brynn hangs a new Wildlife Survey Route tag alongside the old tag that Sue Morse hung 27 years ago.



Large, wind-topped trees are common on this wild land.



Bear claw marks on a white birch. The number written on the tree bark (upper right) keys the marking to Greg's database, which notes that Greg first observed this marking on September 23, 2023.



Oh, the beauty of large downed wood! In 2025, VFF Conservation Forester monitored the forever-wild forest at VFF's Fred Pierce Place on Colby Hill in Lincoln, where large downed wood is a key component of the forest's health and resilience. Photo: Ralph Tursini

Practice

New Land in the Hardscrabble Hills

In 2025, we purchase a 132-acre parcel of forestland in a part of Bristol and Monkton that known as the Hardscrabble Hills—a name coined by ecologist Eric Sorenson for this steep-ridged, rocky area.

The parcel, which we've named [Commoners' Return](#), adjoins the lands of The Watershed Center and the Monkton Town Forest, safeguarding habitat connectivity in this ecologically rich area.

We were able to purchase this land through a series of generosity. Many years ago, Jack and Linda Viertel were looking to donate an 84-acre parcel of land in Tinmouth to a conservation organization, and they asked their friend Bill McKibben for suggestions. He suggested Vermont Family Forests.

We gratefully held their land—which lies far south of our home grounds in the Center-West Ecoregion—for 15 years. When A. Johnson Company put the Hardscrabble Hills land on the market, we decided to sell the Tinmouth land to a conservation-oriented buyer to enable the purchase of this local land. Funds from Lester and Monique Anderson were also a key part of the purchase.



Top: Access path at Commoners' Return. Left: Hermit thrush at Commoners' Return. Right: Linda and Jack Viertel at their land in Tinmouth.



Purchasing Commoners' Return brought Vermont Family Forests full circle in our 30th year. This new parcel adjoins that of our oldest and most steadfast family forest owners—a partnership of old friends who call themselves Hardscrabble Associates. Emile Cote, Victor Bean, and Stan Smith jumped in fully when David Brynn began Vermont Family Forests in 1995, following his community-based, forest-health-first recommendations for forest access, erosion control, timber sales, and more.

Logger Bill Torrey (right) with Stan Smith and Emile Cote many years back, while logging at the Hardscrabble Associates land.



Learning from Structural Complexity in Old-growth Forests

We came away from the 2025 Northeastern Old Growth Conference with insights and inspirations, none of them keener than an even deeper respect for the life-long work of forest ecologist Jerry Franklin. Author Lynda Mapes, a keynote speaker, collaborated with Franklin on her 2025 book, *The Trees are Speaking*. She recalled how, back in 1981, Franklin and his fellow researchers observed and documented the importance of dead wood to old growth forest ecosystem health—a groundbreaking idea at that time.

[His report](#) found four key structural elements in old-growth forests: big, old legacy trees; big, old standing dead trees; big downed trees; and big downed trees *in water*. We have applied his findings to VFF’s [Organic Forest Ecosystem Conservation Checklist](#), encouraging landowners to safeguard these elements in their own forests.

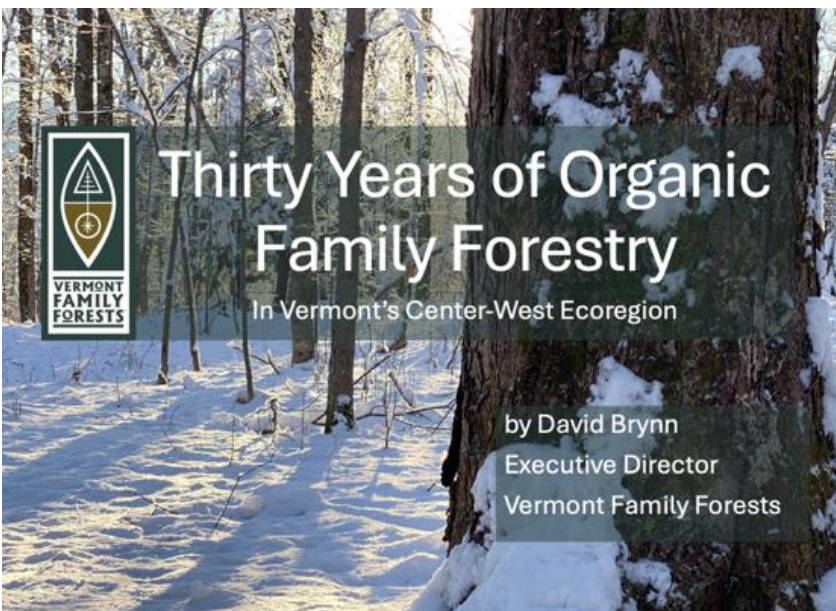
Encouraging Healthy Water on Lands of the Watershed Center

In 2025, we began to implement an erosion control project on the main trail at the Lands of the Watershed Center in Bristol. We obtained a grant from the Addison County Regional Planning Commission’s Clean Water Service Provider program to improve existing drainage conditions, which will help improve the water quality of Norton Brook.

In 2025, we flagged the sites for improving or installing 47 erosion control structures along 1.4 miles of the trail. Because our excavation partner was exceptionally busy during the dry summer season, we needed to postpone installation until 2026. Stay tuned!



An old, non-functioning culvert along the mail trail at the Lands of the Watershed Center. This is one of 47 erosion control structures slated for improvement.



Reflecting on VFF’s Approach to Forestry at FEMC Conference

As the influential educator John Dewey—who was born in Burlington and attended the University of Vermont (UVM)—once wrote, “without application, principles and ideas have no bearing and no test.” At the 2025 Forest Ecosystem Monitoring Cooperative conference at UVM in November, David Brynn gave a presentation highlighting VFF’s application of forestry research, principles, and ideals over the past 30 years in Vermont’s Center-West Ecoregion. In his talk, David focused on VFF’s efforts help landowners practice forest-centered conservation in ways that are ecologically viable, economically sustainable, and socially responsible.

You’ll find a PDF of David’s presentation on our website [resources page](#).

Support

Family Forest Conservationist Training

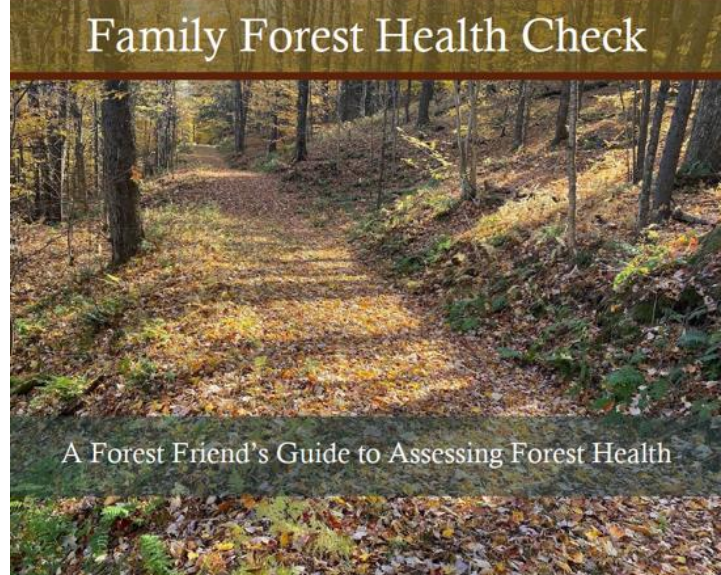
Empowering landowners to learn skills that encourage the health and resilience of the forest community is at the heart of what VFF is all about. In 2025, we prepared for what will be our primary educational outreach in 2026—the Family Forest Conservationist Training.

In this pilot 6-part training course, we will be field-testing our new *Family Forest Health Check* guidebook (right) with 17 willing and eager participants from late April – June. Equipped with forestry tools from our VFF Organic Family Forestry Lending Library, participants will learn how to assess 10 benchmarks of forest health. They'll practice the assessment skills together, then try them out in their own forest between training sessions. In the process, we'll fine-tune the *Health Check* with the aim of offering it as a self-guided tool for forest landowners.

New VFF Team Members

In 2025, Kel Richards (below, right) joined us as Forest Technician, working one day a week. She has brought her bright spirit and can-do attitude to a wide range of projects for VFF—from gathering forest data for UVA forest conservation plans to carpentry work on VFF's Fred Pierce barn in Lincoln to cooking up wood-fired pizzas at our community gatherings.

UVM student Erik Bakken (below) also joined us as a student intern. Erik documented each step of a process we recently undertook—to frame a 700-square-foot Accessory Dwelling Unit (ADU) from local, site-milled green lumber. His assessment took him from the Monkton family forest that yielded the pines for the project to the Lincoln land where the wood was milled and the ADU built—documenting our effort to build an affordable, sustainable, locally sourced home that minimizes capital and maximizes land and labor.





A Forester's Eye View

When VFF's conservation forester Ralph Tursini gathers data for a forest plan or carries out conservation practices for landowners, he brings his keen eye for detail and beauty. This small sampling of his photos gives a glimpse of his work on behalf of forest health and family forest owners. Clockwise from top left:

- Ralph's data sheets record tree species, stand density, site conditions, and more.
- An old sugar maple slowly engulfs a long-forgotten sap bucket.
- Ralph sharpens his saw before beginning Community Forest Renewal work.
- During a forest inventory on VFF's Anderson Fred Pierce land in Lincoln, Ralph saw telltale granular soil castings and their maker, an invasive jumping worm.
- While refreshing boundary paint for a VFF forest landowner, Ralph came upon this vintage barbed wire, known as Brinkerhoff Twisted, patented in 1879.
- VFF's organic approach to forestry recommends covering freshly cut buckthorn stumps with "Buckthorn Baggies" to prevent resprouting.
- Ralph pulls back an old Buckthorn Baggie, revealing the dead stump beneath.



Foster

Barn Yarns with Bill Torrey

In October, we held what was for us, the [capstone celebration of our 30th year](#). On a beautiful autumn afternoon, seventh-generation Vermonter and veteran logger Bill Torrey held more than 70 audience members rapt in the Middle Barn at VFF's Wells Farm, as he told stories of his childhood and decades of logging.

Bill's connection with Vermont Family Forests goes back long before VFF's inception. As David described when he introduced Bill, they met in 1979 when each was green to their profession, and over the next 35 years, they worked together on countless logging jobs around the region.

On its surface, the event—which raised more than \$1,200 for Feeding Addison County—was about storytelling and wood-fired pizzas for a great cause. At its heart though, it was about mutually beneficial relationship—with the land and with each other, encapsulating and celebrating what Vermont Family Forests has been up to for three decades.



Woodwinds in the Middle Barn

Like the Barn Yarns celebration, this year's *Woodwinds in the Middle Barn* combined celebration with fundraising for a good cause. 2025 marked the 14th annual Woodwinds concert, celebrating Lester and Monique Anderson's love of music and of playing recorders.

During the gathering, we held a silent auction of several of Lester's framed photographs, as well as artifacts from the Andersons' years in the far east. All proceeds were donated to the Lake Champlain Maritime Museum's Longboats Program.



Remembering Forest Friends

Chris Runcie

We had the delight and honor of knowing, working with, and discovering the natural world with Chris from the earliest days of Vermont Family Forests. She and Jim were among the founding group of forest landowners who, in the mid-'90s, took the leap with us to embark on a different approach to forestry.

Chris deeply loved and carefully tended her beautiful forest in Starksboro. She loved big, old trees and loved letting them grow, offering home and habitat for myriad other organisms. She shared that delight and love of the natural world with people of all ages, in all aspects of her life.

In our partner organization, The Watershed Center, which formed around the same time as Vermont Family Forests did, Chris served as a founding board member. For many, many years, she helped lead the Warbler Warmup at the Waterworks each spring—a beloved annual birding event.

Thank you, Chris, for your passionate devotion to the natural world and for all the ways you made the world more beautiful.



John Adler

John was part of Vermont Family Forests' world for more than 25 years. Co-owner of Northeast Woodland Training with David Birdsall, John taught scores of the Game of Logging courses we have hosted since the late 1990s. An astoundingly skilled woodsman, John was a patient, kind, enthusiastic teacher dedicated to building confidence and skill among his students.

I was fortunate enough to take the Basic Chainsaw Use and Safety course with John back in 2021, and he comes to mind with deep gratitude whenever I pull out my saw and remember his foundational instructions and reminders (Keep that thumb wrapped!). Though he had repeated those same instructions hundreds of times to his students over the years, I remember well that he delivered them that day with heartfelt concern, presence, precision, respect, and interest that turned my trepidation about operating a saw into skillful empowerment.

Thank you, John, for all you gave to so many people in Vermont's logging and family forest communities.

– Sandra Murphy

Gratitude

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In 2025, VFF's master equipment operator, carpenter, and mechanic extraordinaire Jeremy Perfect tendered his resignation. For countless years, he mowed the extensive fields on VFF's Anderson lands, maintained the tractors, renovated buildings, and basically kept things running smoothly with his immense skill and equally immense sense of humor. Jeremy softened the blow of his departure by connecting us with the "Perfect" replacement—Joe Norton has stepped with phenomenal capability into Jeremy's shoes, and we're thrilled to have him aboard.

Thank you, Jeremy. But remember, we haven't actually accepted your resignation, so be prepared for emeritus consultations!

Partners

Addison County River Watch Collaborative
Addison County Regional Planning Commission
American Endowment Foundation
Bristol Historical Society
Coca-Cola Matching Gifts
Colby Hill Fund
Dever Accounting Services
Feeding Champlain Valley
International Business Machines
Keeping Track
Lake Champlain Maritime Museum
Lewis Creek Association
Lincoln Fire Department
Lintilhac Foundation
Little Hogback Community Forest
Lynne M Miller Family Trust
Main Street Stationer
Middlebury College
Monkton Town Forest

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National Bank of Middlebury
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Silloway Computer Services
Stark Mountain Woodworking
The Watershed Center
Town of Bristol
Town of Lincoln
United States Forest Service
United Way of Addison County
University of Vermont Forestry Program
Vermont Community Foundation
Vermont Department of Fish & Wildlife
VT Dept. of Forests, Parks & Recreation
Vermont Youth Conservation Corps
Vermont Heavy Timber Company
Vermont Land Trust
VT Reptile & Amphibian Atlas Project
Wells Mountain, LLC

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Dechen Rheault, *Homestead Caretaker*
Kel Richards, *Forest Technician*
Ralph Tursini, *Conservation Forester*
Erik Bakken, *Student Intern*

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Front cover photo: VFF's new Commoner's Return land in Bristol and Monkton.