

Franklin County Farmstead and Infrastructure Pool

Franklin County, Vermont



Rising economic instability and a weakening agricultural economy are making it increasingly difficult for farmers to invest in necessary infrastructure improvements, such as waste storage, runoff controls, grazing infrastructure, and heavy-use area protection, which are essential for both environmental compliance and farm viability. Without support, many farms in Franklin County risk falling behind on these upgrades, which could jeopardize water quality and farm productivity. Farmsteads contribute more to visible, concentrated pollution, such as nutrient discharges, than field-based issues, impacting the Missisquoi Bay, Lamoille River, and North Lake Champlain watersheds. To address this, we propose a dedicated NRCS funding pool for FY26 to help farmers overcome financial barriers and implement infrastructure improvements that support regulatory compliance, operational sustainability, and water quality protection, while strengthening the local agricultural economy.

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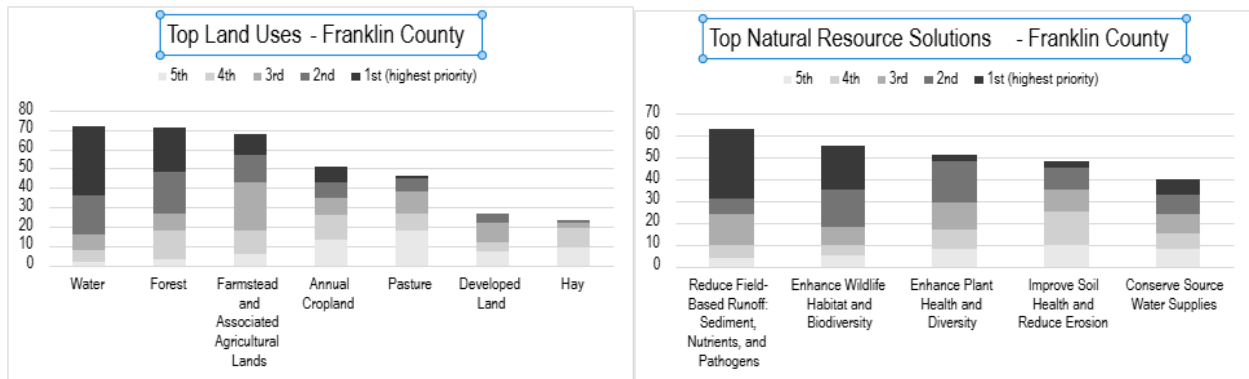
Introduction

This proposal was developed through the Locally Led Conservation Process, which enables Vermont’s Natural Resources Conservation Districts to collaborate with the USDA-NRCS in identifying and advancing local conservation priorities. The purpose of this process is to ensure that conservation investments reflect the needs and insights of the people who live and work on the land—because lasting conservation outcomes are only possible when solutions are shaped by the communities they are meant to serve.

In Franklin County, this process consisted of several community meetings—including an August 2024 event in St. Albans, a January 2025 event in North Hero, and a February 2025

Local Working Group meeting in St. Albans—and a public survey. This survey collected input on priority land uses and resource concerns. Respondents included community members, landowners, farmers, foresters, resource professionals, and recreators.

The top land uses identified by survey respondents were Water, Forest, and Farmstead and Associated Agricultural Lands, followed by Annual Cropland, Pasture, Developed Lands, and Hay. The top natural resource solution identified by survey respondents was “Reducing field-based runoff, sediment, nutrients, and pathogens,” which corresponds to the resource concern “Field Sediment, Nutrient and Pathogen Loss.”



Addressing this concern starts with ensuring farms have the infrastructure necessary to properly manage nutrients. Adequate manure and nutrient storage facilities are critical for timing field applications that minimize runoff risk in accordance with Nutrient Management Plans, regulatory requirements, and weather conditions.

Given NRCS’s focus on supporting agricultural producers, the Franklin County Natural Resources Conservation District (FCNRCD) concluded that Farmstead and Associated Agricultural Lands represent the most appropriate local target for NRCS technical and financial assistance, particularly through the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP). This focus is timely as well: while FY25 emphasized forestry and wildlife across Northwest Vermont, FY26 offers an opportunity to concentrate on the farmstead-scale infrastructure needs that underpin water quality and farm viability.

This proposal builds directly from the community’s vision, as described in the Franklin County Conservation Action Plan, which calls for economically viable farms, sustainable local agriculture, food sovereignty, preserved farmland, and environmental stewardship. By addressing pressing farmstead infrastructure challenges, this initiative aims to move the county closer to that vision—supporting both agricultural productivity and clean water across the landscape.

Problem Statement

Rising costs associated with infrastructure improvements—exacerbated by economic instability and increased costs of building materials—are making it increasingly difficult for farmers to invest in critical upgrades. Farmstead improvements, such as waste storage, runoff controls, and heavy-use area protection, are essential not only for environmental compliance but also for the financial viability of agricultural operations. Without support, many farms risk falling behind on essential infrastructure, which could jeopardize both water quality and farm productivity.

Farmsteads are more often the source of visible, concentrated, and high-risk pollution issues—such as direct nutrient discharges into nearby waterbodies—than field-based non-point source concerns that are more broadly addressed by existing programs. These point-source risks are particularly acute in Franklin County, where agricultural activity contributes to phosphorus loading in the Missisquoi Bay, Lamoille River, and North Lake Champlain watersheds. These watersheds suffer from impaired water quality, including harmful cyanobacteria blooms, which limit recreational use and threaten aquatic ecosystems.

To address these urgent needs, we are proposing the establishment of a dedicated NRCS funding pool for FY26 focused exclusively on farmstead and infrastructure practices. This pool will help farmers overcome economic barriers and implement the infrastructure necessary for regulatory compliance, operational sustainability, and long-term water quality improvements. These investments will not only reduce pollution but also strengthen the local agricultural economy by protecting the viability of farms in Franklin County.

Goals and Objectives

The locally defined desired future condition is one in which Franklin County farms are economically viable, environmentally sustainable, and equipped with the infrastructure necessary to support compliance with water quality regulations. Farms should be able to manage manure and nutrients effectively, minimize point-source pollution, and contribute to the long-term health of the Missisquoi Bay, Lamoille River, and Northern Lake Champlain watersheds. Local stakeholders envision a future in which farms operate in balance with natural systems, providing food, livelihoods, and ecosystem services without degrading soil and water resources.

To achieve these future conditions, targeted investments must be made in farmstead infrastructure. This includes the adoption of best management practices (BMPs) via conservation structures such as manure storage facilities, clean water diversions, stormwater controls, subsurface drainage, and grazing infrastructure. These investments will help producers store and manage nutrients appropriately, protect waterways from runoff, and meet regulatory requirements while remaining financially stable.

Currently, there are 10 farmstead infrastructure applications in the NRCS pipeline, representing \$2,064,819.56 in potential funding. Of these, the top 8 projects, which align most closely with the \$2 million funding request, cover approximately 40 acres of agricultural land. This targeted group will serve as an initial focus for this strategy, providing a clear path for prioritizing investments that deliver the greatest environmental benefit and economic impact within the available funding window.

The goal of this strategy is to create a dedicated funding stream for farmstead and infrastructure practices through NRCS's EQIP program. The aim is to enable producers to access resources that allow them to install the infrastructure needed to address point-source pollution issues—something that is otherwise cost-prohibitive for even the largest farms in the region.

Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, and Time-Bound (SMART) Goals:

1. **Specific:** Support at least 8 of the 10 Franklin County landowners currently with farmstead applications in the NRCS pipeline, as well as any additional applications, to implement farmstead infrastructure improvements that reduce nutrient and pathogen runoff over the next 3-5 years (average project timeline).
2. **Measurable:** Track progress through the number of EQIP contracts established, the number of infrastructure projects completed and total funding obligated. Track environmental outcomes through number of farms improving compliance standing with VAAFM and additional storage for waste and manure.
3. **Achievable:** Prioritize practices that are feasible for the size of the operation, and those that support compliance with Vermont's RAPs, while providing targeted technical and financial assistance to address known resource concerns.
4. **Relevant:** Farmstead improvements are needed to meet regional water quality goals and to improve the health of the Missisquoi Bay, Lamoille River, and Northern Lake Champlain watersheds and economic viability of farms in Franklin County.
5. **Time-Bound:** Contracts are anticipated to be signed in FY26, with producers likely committing to 3-5 year contracts, aligning with typical EQIP funding cycles and

providing adequate time for infrastructure installation and environmental outcomes.

Expected outputs of the strategy include several infrastructure improvement projects installed across the county and an increase in producer participation in EQIP. Expected outcomes include improved farm viability, measurable reductions in nutrient and pathogen loading to water bodies, and improved infrastructure that supports both livestock and human health and safety. This strategy ultimately supports the dual goals of clean water and a thriving agricultural economy in Franklin County.

Alternatives

If no action is taken, it is unlikely that farms in Franklin County will be able to make necessary improvements to their farmsteads and infrastructure in the coming years; with statewide competitive EQIP pools, these highly expensive projects often do not rank high enough to get funded. The cost of materials, labor, and farm inputs continues to rise, while income from agricultural products remains stagnant or even declines. These financial pressures are exacerbated by macroeconomic challenges, including inflation, higher costs of construction materials, steel, aluminum, and agricultural equipment, and increased uncertainty in the agricultural markets.

Franklin County's proximity to and interdependence with Canada adds another layer of vulnerability. Many farms rely on cross-border trade for both inputs and market access, meaning fluctuations in currency, trade policy, and supply chain disruptions across the U.S.-Canada border have immediate consequences for local operations. With economic instability growing and the cost of inaction mounting, farmers are at greater risk of falling out of compliance with environmental regulations, losing productivity, or ultimately exiting the industry altogether.

Alternatives to this proposed funding pool that will continue to be pursued include efforts to increase grant caps and funding pool sizes from existing programs, such as the Vermont Agency of Agriculture, Food & Markets' Best Management Practices (BMP) Program. Expanding farm business planning services through the Vermont Housing and Conservation Board's Farm and Forest Viability Program also remains a key strategy. In the long term, Payment for Ecosystem Services (PES)-type programs offer a promising model to compensate land stewards for providing clean water, habitat, food, and other ecological benefits.

While these alternative strategies are valuable and should be pursued concurrently, they are not sufficient to meet the urgent need for infrastructure improvements on many Franklin County farms. The proposed local funding pool offers a responsive, locally led solution tailored to the immediate economic and environmental challenges facing the region's producers.

Regarding environmental compliance, all proposed projects funded through this pool will adhere to National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) requirements. Partners, including NRCS and state agencies, will ensure that NEPA reviews are completed for applicable projects prior to disbursing funds. This process will help prevent negative environmental impacts and ensure that funded projects align with federal and state conservation goals.

Proposed Solution and Actions

The proposed solution is to create a dedicated, locally administered funding pool to assist Franklin County farmers in implementing essential farmstead and infrastructure projects. These projects are often high-cost, high-priority investments that are required for compliance with state and federal agricultural and environmental regulations. They are also necessary to improve operational efficiency, animal and human health, and overall farm viability. By directing technical and financial resources toward these improvements, the conservation partnership can address both point-source pollution issues and economic barriers faced by producers.

This is the preferred solution because it directly targets a critical gap in current conservation programming: the lack of readily accessible funding for infrastructure projects that are too large or complex for field-based EQIP practices, but too small or specialized to qualify for sufficient funds from state infrastructure programs. In addition, this solution is tailored to the specific needs identified by Franklin County producers and stakeholders through surveys, community input, and the Conservation Action Plan process. It reflects the locally led conservation model by responding to the distinct regulatory, environmental, and economic conditions in the region.

To meet the objectives of this strategy, several types of information about the proposed solutions must be carefully considered, including:

- The specific regulatory compliance requirements set by the Vermont Agency of Agriculture, Food and Markets (VAAF) and the USDA NRCS.

- Site-specific planning and engineering assessments to ensure practices are appropriately designed and sited.
- The financial capacity of individual producers and their eligibility for various cost-share and technical assistance programs.
- Seasonal timing and logistical constraints around construction, manure storage management, and livestock movements.

The primary conservation practices supported by this fund include manure storage systems, waste transfer structures, stormwater runoff controls, access roads, roof runoff systems, livestock watering systems, structures for water control, heavy use area protection, and subsurface drainage systems. These practices not only enable farms to meet regulatory thresholds, but also help reduce nutrient and pathogen runoff, improve animal and worker welfare, and extend the lifespan of agricultural infrastructure. The complete list of practices includes:

- 101: CNMP Design and Implementation Activity
- 102: Comprehensive Nutrient Management Plan
- 157: Nutrient Management Design and Implementation Activity
- 313: Waste Storage Facility
- 316: Animal Mortality Facility
- 317: Composting Facility
- 342: Critical Area Planting
- 360: Waste Facility Closure
- 362: Diversion
- 367: Roofs and Covers
- 382: Fence
- 484: Mulching
- 500: Obstruction Removal
- 516: Livestock Pipeline
- 520: Pond Sealing or Lining, Compacted Soil Treatment
- 521: Pond Sealing or Lining, Geomembrane or Geosynthetic Clay Liner
- 522: Pond Sealing or Lining – Concrete
- 533: Plumbing Plant
- 558: Roof Runoff Structure
- 560: Access Road
- 561: Heavy Use Protection Area
- 570: Stormwater Runoff Control

- 574: Spring Development
- 575: Trails and Walkways
- 576: Livestock Shelter Structure
- 578: Stream Crossing
- 590: Nutrient Management
- 606: Subsurface Drain
- 614: Watering Facility
- 620: Underground Outlet
- 627: Wastewater Treatment – Milk House
- 629: Waste Treatment
- 632: Waste Separation Facility
- 634: Waste Transfer
- 642: Water Well

The benefits of this strategy are multifaceted. Environmentally, the implementation of these practices will reduce phosphorus, nitrogen, and pathogen loading into nearby water bodies—helping the region meet TMDL targets and protect public health and recreation opportunities. Economically, the improvements will support farm profitability by reducing losses, improving animal productivity, and helping producers avoid costly fines or shutdowns due to non-compliance. Socially, the visibility of these investments and improvements can enhance community support for agriculture and demonstrate farmers’ commitment to stewardship and sustainability.

The costs of implementation include upfront investments in planning, engineering, materials, and labor, as well as ongoing maintenance responsibilities. However, these costs are significantly outweighed by the long-term gains in water quality protection, farm economic viability, and community resilience. This funding pool will help offset the capital burden for producers, making these vital improvements more accessible and more likely to succeed.

By investing in these infrastructure projects now, we can help secure a future where farms continue to operate legally, sustainably, and profitably—ensuring both environmental protection and food security for Franklin County and beyond.

Partnerships and Other Funding Sources

The success of this farmstead and infrastructure improvement initiative depends on a strong partnership between the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) and the Franklin County Natural Resources Conservation District (FCNRCD), along with the active participation of local farmers. NRCS will serve as the primary provider of financial and technical assistance through EQIP, offering cost-share funding for eligible farmstead practices, while landowners contribute a required portion of the project costs. This partnership structure ensures that investments are made collaboratively, leveraging both federal funding and farmer commitment to conservation improvements.

FCNRCD will provide outreach support but will not be offering any financial assistance. Instead, the District will focus on helping producers navigate the application process, develop conservation plans, prioritize improvements, and meet program requirements. The District also brings deep local knowledge to the effort, having already built relationships with many producers across the county and conducted site visits where specific infrastructure and compliance challenges have been identified. This foundation of trust and familiarity ensures the program can be implemented quickly and effectively with targeted, ready-to-go projects.

Given the high engineering workload associated with many of these projects, multiple options exist for supporting engineering needs:

- The preferred option is that applications that have already been under development by NRCS engineers and planners are the priority-funded applications. Many of these applications have several steps of engineering design completed previously by NRCS engineers, including manure wastewater handling plans. The goal would be for NRCS Engineers to continue to work on these projects.
- TSP Engineering Funds: There are potentially TSP engineering funds available. It is our understanding that these can be included as line items within NRCS contracts, which count against the \$450k Farm Bill cap, or through A&E TSPs, which are not embedded in a participant's EQIP and do not impact a producer's Farm Bill limit. These funds are paid directly to engineers through NRCS.
- Third-Party Engineers: Producers have the option to hire third-party engineers independently with their own funds, provided the engineer holds a Vermont Professional Engineer (PE) stamp.

Given that many of the projects targeted for this funding pool are already in the NRCS pipeline, much of the necessary engineering work has already been completed or is in

progress, reducing the overall design burden for new applicants. For projects that are not in the NRCS existing workload, cannot access outside engineers, and are still prioritized by this pool, it is expected that this workload would be incorporated into NRCS engineer workload in future years when capacity is available.

While NRCS is the primary financial partner, FCNRCD's contributions in technical assistance, outreach, and producer support are critical to maximizing program efficiency and participation. Additional collaborators—such as the Vermont Agency of Agriculture, Food & Markets, the VHCB Farm and Forest Viability Program, and UVM Extension—may offer complementary services such as business planning, nutrient management assistance, precision agriculture, and technical assistance and design, but they are not expected to contribute financial resources to this pool.

Given FCNRCD's previous work and engagement in the region, a significant number of eligible farms have already been identified, and many are prepared to begin project implementation as soon as funding is available. This readiness will reduce administrative delays and ensure that conservation outcomes can be delivered on an accelerated timeline.

The total cost of this initiative is \$2 million, with NRCS covering the majority of implementation costs through EQIP contracts. Producers will contribute their required cost-share, and additional support—including outreach and application assistance—will be provided by FCNRCD through existing staff capacity and partner coordination.

This approach maximizes the efficiency of federal funding, builds on existing local relationships and knowledge, and ensures that both environmental and economic outcomes can be achieved through collaborative, community-driven conservation.

Implementation

This initiative will require close coordination between NRCS and FCNRCD, along with significant staff capacity for planning, design, outreach, and project management. Farmstead and infrastructure projects are inherently complex and require a high level of technical support. Additional NRCS Planner and Engineer time will be critical to advance these projects from application to completion. Many of these improvements involve structural practices that necessitate careful site analysis, engineered designs, permitting, and long-term compliance considerations.

Infrastructure improvement projects typically take several months to complete—beginning with initial planning and conservation practice design, followed by construction, installation, and verification phases. The extended timeline makes it essential to start identifying and preparing projects early, especially given the permitting and contractor coordination that can affect progress.

While there is no upper limit to the amount of investment that could be beneficial to farmstead and infrastructure improvements in Franklin County, we propose \$2 million in NRCS financial assistance as an initial goal for this funding pool. These types of projects are historically expensive, and with current economic volatility—including inflation, labor shortages, and changing supply chains affecting building material costs—the overall price tag is only expected to grow. A \$2 million investment would support a meaningful number of projects across the county, providing measurable environmental and economic benefits.

Technical assistance needs are equally significant. NRCS planners and engineers will take the lead on developing conservation plans, designing practices, and certifying project completion. FCNRCD staff will provide complementary support by identifying and engaging with eligible producers, assisting with applications, gathering necessary documentation, and supporting communication between the farmer and NRCS throughout the process. FCNRCD will not provide financial assistance but will dedicate staff time to maximize producer participation and ensure that planning timelines are met.

Project prioritization and sequencing will be coordinated by NRCS and FCNRCD. Projects will be prioritized based on several criteria, including:

- Previous application deferral
- Urgency of project implementation due to corrective action requirements
- Likelihood of water quality improvement

Outreach will be carried out primarily by FCNRCD, which has existing relationships with most of the target producers which it can leverage to promote the funding opportunity. One-on-one outreach and targeted follow-ups will also be a major strategy for identifying suitable participants and ensuring applications are submitted in a timely manner. NRCS planners are also expected to coordinate with farmers that they are familiar with.

In summary, the implementation of this funding pool will require a coordinated, multi-year effort that leans heavily on NRCS technical staff, FCNRCD outreach capacity, and proactive engagement from the local agricultural community. With dedicated funding and

collaborative management, this initiative can have an immediate and lasting impact on both farm viability and water quality in Franklin County.

Progress Evaluation and Monitoring

Progress will be evaluated based on the amount of funds obligated, the number of conservation practices implemented, and the number of producers assisted. These metrics will be tracked by NRCS and FCNRCD throughout the life of the project.

Reports summarizing progress will be shared semi-annually with NRCS leadership and local stakeholders. These updates will inform program adjustments and ensure transparency.

To ensure continuous improvement, an annual evaluation will assess the efficiency and effectiveness of the implementation process. This will include feedback from participating landowners and technical staff. On-the-ground monitoring of completed projects will be conducted jointly by NRCS and FCNRCD staff. Monitoring will focus on documenting environmental outcomes, ensuring compliance, and capturing lessons learned for future efforts.