

A ROADMAP TO ECOSYSTEM INTEGRITY AND FOREST RESILIENCY IN VERMONT'S COLD HOLLOW MOUNTAINS





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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

When a hundred community members came together in late 2008 to discuss the future of their shared landscape, no one in the room had an inkling of what might come of it.

Folks from seven northern Vermont towns – Bakersfield, Belvidere, Enosburgh, Fletcher, Montgomery, Richford, and Waterville - sat down with maps of the region to identify those areas most precious to them, whether for hunting and fishing, timber harvesting, hiking and mountain biking, or for solace and reflection. They circled both large swaths and small corners of forest that had some connection to their family, heart, industry, or identity. It wasn't until the special places they identified together were superimposed over a map of some early forest block analysis work that light bulbs went off.

CANADA

**ENOSBURG** 

BAKERSFIELD

FLETCHER

BELVIDERE

WATERVILLE

VERMONT

RICHFORD

MONTGOMERY

Without forethought or intention, the people in the room had called out the highest ecologically ranked forest blocks in our region as those areas that also held the greatest human value to the community. The intersectionality of our community's identity and the building blocks of ecological resiliency couldn't have been clearer. Though the name came later, that was the night Cold Hollow to Canada was born.

Since then Cold Hollow to Canada (CHC) has grown to become one of the leading grassroots conservation nonprofits in northern New England. Working in the seven towns that define our shared corner of the Northern Forest, the organization has wedded stewardship and conservation in an effort to create real and lasting impact at both the parcel level and the landscape level. We see our place here as members of a community that not only includes the people but also the soils, waters, plants, and animals - or as Aldo Leopold put it: the land. And as members of this community we have a responsibility to it. Protecting large unfragmented, intact blocks of forest within the region – and the connectivity between them – not only protects wildlife habitat, but protects the working landscape and the rural communities that depend on it. Put simply, it protects that which defines the place we call home.

Today we find ourselves in a period of rapid and accelerating change. Global climate change, demographic shifts, and market disruptions in what were once cornerstones of rural economies have left us at a crossroads as stewards of this immense and critical resource. How we respond to these changes will define our communities for generations to come, and will decide whether the shared identity around this place we call home will persist. To ensure that we choose the right path, we have created this document, which describes CHC's plan to guide our land protection, stewardship, and community empowerment activities. In the first section we describe our mission, vision, and pillars, which exemplify our core work. We then explore the foundational importance of these forests, or the "why" behind our mission. Next, we turn to the key elements and goals, and finally to the plans we have developed to help us achieve our mission. While this plan will no doubt evolve as necessary to keep pace with the challenges we face, it is designed to guide our work over the next five years, and serve as a banner under which we collectively move forward together.

Although the window within which we must meet these challenges is already closing, and the urgency of our task rising, the opportunity at hand is momentous. As James Baldwin once wrote, "Not everything that is faced can be changed, but nothing can be changed until it is faced." We humbly submit this plan as a roadmap for our community to face the challenges before us, and to effect the change which we are called to, in securing the future of the place we call home.

Charlie Hancock Board Chair



OUR MISSION IS TO MAINTAIN ECOSYSTEM INTEGRITY, BIOLOGICAL DIVERSITY, AND FOREST RESILIENCY THROUGHOUT THE COLD HOLLOW TO CANADA REGION, WITH A FOCUS ON COMMUNITY-LED STEWARDSHIP AND THE CONSERVATION OF OUR WORKING LANDSCAPE IN THE FACE OF A CHANGING CLIMATE.



# VISION

A resilient and connected ecosystem across the entire Northern Forest that is supported through permanent protection, sustainable stewardship, and engaged local communities.

# PILLARS

These pillars exemplify our core work—they are the main methods we employ to achieve our mission of ecosystem integrity and forest resiliency.

### SUSTAINABLE STEWARDSHIP

Stewarding forests at a landscape-scale based on ecosystem integrity, biological diversity, and climate resiliency, while supporting a strong and sustainable rural economy

### FORESTLAND CONSERVATION

Permanently protecting contiguous forests to mitigate the climate crisis and maintain connectivity for wildlife habitat and movement

### COMMUNITY EMPOWERMENT

Equipping local communities with tools to advance forest resiliency, community well-being, and environmental justice, in partnership with local, regional, and international conservation organizations

## OUR FORESTS

## THE FORESTS OF HOME: A REGIONAL CROSSROAD WITH GLOBAL SIGNIFICANCE

The Northern Forest encompasses nearly 82 million acres ranging across the northeastern United States and southeastern Canada. It includes all or a portion of western Massachusetts, northern New York, Vermont, New Hampshire, Maine, southern Quebec, New Brunswick, Nova Scotia, and Prince Edward Island, and it has been identified as the largest, most intact broadleaved temperate forest remaining in the world. Inhabited by 470 vertebrate species and 2,700 plant species, this vast forest is also home to 5 million people. Intersecting this east-west swath of forest in Vermont stand the Green Mountains, running north-south at the northernmost reach of the Appalachians. Cold Hollow to Canada lies at this key intersection, spanning nearly 170,000 acres that straddle the spine of the Greens. **This positions the forests of the Cold Hollow region at a crucial nexus for wildlife movement within the larger Northern Forest ecosystem, providing habitat for wide-ranging mammals and the greatest diversity of breeding bird species in the United States**. This wildlife linkage runs from the Northern Green Mountains in the United States to the Sutton Range (Green Mountains in Canada), and has been identified by Two Countries, One



Northern Forest Wildlife Connectivity Linkages: Shown here are the priority linkages researched and developed by 2 Countries, 1 Forest for preserving connectivity for wildlife movement throughout the Northern Forest. The Cold Hollow Mountains are part of the Northern Green Mountains priority linkage. Our work to steward and conserve forestland in this area is key to advancing our greater vision of a resilient and connected ecosystem across the entire Northern Forest.



TROMBULAK, S.C., M.G. ANDERSON, R.F. BALDWIN, K. BEAZLEY, J.C. RAY, C. REINING, G. WOOLMER, C. BETTIGOLE, G. FORBES, & I. GRATTON. 2008\*

Forest as one of the top six wildlife connectivity linkages in the Northern Forest. The functional integrity of the entire Northern Forest can be maintained by conserving forest blocks and connectivity in these six linkages.

Our forests are also crucial for people. Vermont's forests define our cultural heritage and act as an economic engine, contributing to an estimated annual economic output of \$1.4 billion and supporting 10,500 jobs in forestry, logging, processing, specialty woodworking, and wood heating. Vermont's forest recreation economy generates another \$1.9 billion in economic output annually, and supports 10,000 additional jobs. The maple sugar industry adds another \$54 million in production and supports approximately 3,000 full time jobs. This working forest is critical for both wildlife and people.

However, with only 20% of the landscape protected through conservation, this forest is imperiled by the fragmentation that results from development occurring simultaneously with the increasingly dangerous impacts of climate change.

#### WE ARE LOSING FORESTS NOW

Today, Vermont is losing forest cover for the first time since the mid-1800s, back when farmers were still clearing land for cows, sheep, and crops. Today, with increased forest fragmentation caused by development, we risk losing the important contributions that working forests make to our economy, our ecology, and our culture. At the center of the Northern Forest, Vermont is at the crossroads of connectivity for the entire Northern Forest ecoregion. Degradation of the connecting landscape here could isolate the forests lying to the north and south. We have a grave responsibility and a narrow opportunity of time to protect the integrity of the Northern Forest ecoregion. Increased forestland conservation is vital to maintain Vermont's working landscape and the health of our forests at a scale large enough to sustain functionality in the future. **More than two-thirds of Vermont's forestland is privately owned, making it important to reach out to individual and family forest owners in order to maintain healthy forests across our region**. Keeping forests as forests through conservation, stewardship, and economic viability is central to CHC's mission and vision.

#### CLIMATE CHANGE: THE LENS THROUGH WHICH WE FOCUS OUR WORK

Changes to Vermont's climate are creating different growing conditions for forests. In response, we need to change how we manage forests if they are to remain viable for the variety of personal, societal, and ecological values they have been providing for generations. Cold Hollow to Canada has been a leader in Vermont in climate change adaptation and mitigation strategies. Using strategies developed by the U.S. Forest Service, we help landowners manage their forests to withstand and adapt to the effects of climate change while protecting the economic and ecological values within a resilient forest. CHC's Woodlots Program was the first private lands demonstration project chosen by The Northern Institute of Applied Climate Science to work on climate resilience and response. We help landowners determine which of the Forest Service strategies and approaches are currently being implemented and identify areas that could be improved. Landowners have learned on-the-ground management strategies that address climate change impacts. With our partners, CHC is also piloting ways to increase carbon capture and storage through improved forest management practices, and by facilitating our landowners' entry into global carbon markets through the nation's first aggregated carbon offset project.

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# WHAT WILL SUCCESS LOOK LIKE?



## LANDSCAPE-LEVEL FOREST MANAGEMENT IN THE FACE OF CLIMATE CHANGE

Cold Hollow to Canada has identified exemplary forest management practices that it promotes among landowners to help them meet financial, societal, and ecological goals. These practices can be applied while managing for timber, maple sugar production, carbon sequestration, water, wildlife habitat, access, and scenic beauty. While respecting the forest management goals of individual landowners, successful landscape-level stewardship encourages forest management activities that take into account and operate on a multi-parcel, or landscape scale.

Landowners can enhance the well-being of the planet by managing their forests using climate change adaptation strategies. This includes managing for diversity of plant and animal species. It also involves increasing diversity of forest structure by promoting different age classes while growing larger, longer-lived trees. Such strategies keep the forest connected and intact, capturing and storing carbon, and better able to respond to the impacts brought about by climate change. Additionally, the implementation of these strategies can result in higher value timber products, and introduce carbon as a monetized forest product. As landowners become more connected to their land through CHC practices and a climate change focus, incentives for permanent conservation expand. Communities that address climate change in town planning and through civic engagement sponsored through CHC activities promote a better understanding of and support for conservation.



**OUR GOAL** Through the replication of the Woodlots Program across the Northern Forest, individual landowners manage their forestland for the benefit of the broader forest community and with a focus on climate resiliency.



#### CORE BLOCKS CONSERVED AND CONNECTIVITY PRESERVED FOR WILDLIFE MOVEMENT AND CLIMATE CHANGE MITIGATION

Connectivity across the landscape allows for the movement of plants and animals, whether for migration, or as ranges shift in response to a changing climate. By allowing for species movement across the landscape, connectivity supports genetic diversity within species and species resilience in the face of environmental stressors. Thus, connectivity is critical to maintaining an ecologically functional landscape. Cold Hollow to Canada works to promote connectivity through multiple mechanisms, including town planning and zoning, stewarding adjacent landscapes, and securing conservation easements within core forest blocks.

A core block is an area of contiguous forest and other associated natural communities and habitats (wetlands, ponds, and cliffs, for example) that remains unfragmented by roads, agriculture, or other development. Besides enhancing connectivity, keeping forests as forests is one of the best ways to mitigate climate change, as tree leaves capture carbon from the atmosphere and store it in trees and forest soils. Additionally, the ecological and biological functions inherent in interior forest blocks protect native species and promote the ecological functioning of the landscape as a whole. An ecologically functioning landscape not only supports wildlife, but is also critical for human well-being since it can simultaneously support a thriving forest economy.



**CHC Conservation Priorities:** Shown are our conserved lands (as of April 2021) as well as our land conservation priorities within the CHC region. These forest blocks and key connecting landscapes were identified through an analysis of their ecological conditions, including biological diversity, connectedness, and climate resilience.

We have identified nearly 120,000 acres of unfragmented forest blocks in our seven-town region. When CHC began its work, approximately 23,000 acres had been conserved through state ownership and private conservation easements. One key measure of success is to double that number and conserve another 23,000 acres by 2030.

**OUR GOAL** A connected landscape that allows for species movement between core habitat blocks, with an additional 23,000 acres of forestland conserved by 2030.







#### COMMUNITY CONNECTION, EXCHANGE, AND INVESTMENT IN COMMON CONSERVATION GOALS

The underpinning of all of Cold Hollow to Canada's work is its connections within communities in our seven towns. Sustainable stewardship and permanent conservation of forestland in this area would not be possible without community investment in our mission. CHC works with our communities to equip them with the tools, knowledge, and resources to advance forest resiliency, both collectively (as through a Town Plan or zoning bylaws that address resource concerns) and on individual lands managed as part of a shared landscape (as through our Woodlots program). We start by helping each community envision common conservation goals. Subsequent convenings and community-focused outreach help build a shared understanding of landscape-level forest resiliency within a set of shared priorities. Through all of this, plus our citizen science programs, we work to enhance community commitment to stewarding our region's rich and resilient forests. Fostering an appreciation within our communities for our corner of the Northern Forest, and an understanding of its importance, is foundational to building the grassroots support of our mission.

**OUR GOAL** Community members work together through a self-directed, grassroots approach to collectively protect the forests of the Cold Hollow to Canada region.

## HOW WE WORK

### SUSTAINABLE STEWARDSHIP

#### WOODLOTS PROGRAM

The **Woodlots Program** is a peer-to-peer model for engaging an increasing number of individual and family forest owners in forest management practices. One of CHC's signature projects, it continues to gain acclaim across New England as a model for advancing collaboration in forest conservation, and we are developing a toolkit to assist other groups in developing similar projects. The Woodlots Program gathers a group of landowners from a town with contiguous or nearly contiguous forested properties, focusing their management activities at a landscape scale. The neighbor-to-neighbor collaboration results in a cumulative impact more significant than what one property owner can accomplish on their own.

Landowners invited to be a part of a Woodlots group enjoy informal gatherings each season to share their experiences and receive technical support from CHC. The following are some of the key practices of the CHC Woodlots Program:

- Climate Change adaptation and mitigation
- Interior songbird habitat assessment
- Wildlife habitat management
- Best management practices (BMPs) for working lands
- Water quality protection
- Invasive species control

Our Woodlots Program was one of the first pilot demonstration forest projects, and the first one on private lands, with the U.S. Forest Service and The Northern Institute of Applied Climate Science. Our cross-boundary stewardship program includes a climate change analysis of all the forest management plans for each woodlot owner in each town woodlot program. Landowners learn what they are already doing right and what more they can do to keep our forests healthy as we experience climate change stress.

#### CARBON AGGREGATION PROJECT

Managing carbon is the key to controlling and minimizing the escalation of climate change worldwide. Forests are one of the earth's largest carbon sinks and can be sustainably managed to maximize their long-term carbon capture and storage through strategies known as natural climate solutions. Three key carbon management strategies include conservation, reforestation, and improved forest management.

Landowners can benefit from improved carbon management through the sale of carbon offset credits, which are based on the increase in carbon capture and storage compared to a typical forest management regime. Under the voluntary market, companies or individuals can purchase the credits to offset their emissions. The additional cashflow from their forests helps increase the economic viability of owning and managing forests for family and individual owners, and can



#### SUCCESS STORY: NRCS AWARD FOR FOREST MANAGEMENT

In 2017, we received a \$650,000 award from the Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS), a nation-wide agency within the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), to support landowners' implementation of climate adaptation and wildlife habitat practices on forestland in our region. This award provides both technical and financial support for forest management to landowners participating in our Woodlots Program.



make conservation easements economically feasible for more of them.

The economics of setting up carbon offsets work well for large parcels of 5,000 acres or more because the initial costs of inventorying the forest, setting up the program, and the ongoing monitoring costs are small compared to the revenue from offset sales. On the other hand, the cost is prohibitive for owners of the smaller parcels in Vermont, typically 500 acres or less.

CHC is helping solve this dilemma as part of a pilot project with the University of Vermont, Vermont Land Trust, and The Nature Conservancy of Vermont. Our Carbon Aggregation Project, the first of its kind in the nation, aggregates smaller parcels to overcome the overhead expense problem and sell carbon credits on the voluntary offset market. CHC, with its local knowledge of the forested landscape and relationships with community members, acts as the convener and agent for the group of landowners enrolled in the project.

As a partner in this pilot project, CHC is helping to show that aggregation can bring Vermont forest parcels into this emerging marketplace. We hope this project will serve as a model across New England and help to enhance the economic viability of owning and managing private forestland for increased carbon sequestration.

### 2021-2025 ACTION PLAN: SUSTAINABLE STEWARDSHIP

Stewarding forests at a landscape-scale based on ecosystem integrity, biological diversity, and climate resiliency, while supporting a strong and sustainable rural economy.

#### OUR GOAL

Through the replication of the Woodlots Program across the Northern Forest, individual landowners manage their forestland for the benefit of the broader forest community and with a focus on climate resiliency

#### **OUR PLANS**

- Build peer-to-peer networks of land stewards (the Woodlots Program) in all seven towns of the Cold Hollow to Canada region
- Host regular convenings that enhance knowledge of sustainable stewardship practices, local natural history, climate resilience, and the role played by each individual parcel in the larger landscape
- Connect community members with funding sources for forest management practices that enhance wildlife habitat, forest health, and climate resilience
- Connect community members with CHC partner resources that enhance forest resilience
- Develop a toolkit to share the Woodlots Program with communities across the Northern Forest
- Share lessons from our Carbon Aggregation Project with communities beyond the CHC region

### FORESTLAND CONSERVATION

HOW WE WORK

#### COLD HOLLOW LAND CONSERVATION FUND

Conservation easements are the best way to permanently protect private land from being fragmented in the future. In a conservation easement, a landowner agrees to sell or donate certain rights associated with his or her property – most often the right to subdivide or develop – and a private organization or public agency agrees to hold the rights, thereby protecting the property even if it changes ownership. Our partner, the Vermont Land Trust, holds easements on a number of properties in the Cold Hollow to Canada region. We work closely with them to identify priority projects, build relationships, and finalize projects.

Landowners interested in donating a conservation easement generally face costs of \$11,000-\$15,000 per parcel. These costs for legal services and baseline documentation can represent an insurmountable barrier to landowners wishing to conserve their lands. The **Cold Hollow Land Conservation Fund** helps solve this problem by providing funds to eliminate or lessen financial outlays for landowners within the CHC region who are interested in placing a permanent conservation easement on their land.

CHC plans to significantly increase the capacity of this fund to assist landowners in transaction costs. And while most easements are donated, we hope to provide some funding to purchase easements, even if at less than the appraised value. Bargain sale funding could further incentivize landowners to conserve forestland, increasing the pace necessary to meet our ambitious goal of conserving 23,000 acres by 2030.



## 2021-2025 ACTION PLAN: FORESTLAND CONSERVATION

Permanently protecting contiguous forests to mitigate the climate crisis and maintain connectivity for wildlife habitat and movement.

#### OUR GOAL

A connected landscape that allows for species movement between core habitat blocks, with an additional 23,000 acres of forestland conserved by 2030.

#### **OUR PLANS**

- Further identify key connecting landscapes that allow for species movement
- Engage with landowners to build interest in permanent conservation
- Launch a capital campaign to fortify the Cold Hollow Land Conservation Fund
- Partner with the Vermont Land Trust, the Forest Legacy Program, and Northeast Wilderness Trust to leverage funds and hold easements for the permanent protection of forestland



#### SUCCESS STORY: PRESERVING CONNECTIVITY

In collaboration with the Vermont Land Trust, we helped conserve this 557 acre property in Belvidere in 2018 with financial support from the Cold Hollow Land Conservation Fund. This parcel functions as a critical link between two previously conserved forest blocks, so was of high priority to conserve in order to maintain forest connectivity for wildlife movement in this area.

## HOW WE WORK

### **COMMUNITY EMPOWERMENT**

#### COLLABORATING WITH TOWNS ON COMMUNITY-LED CONSERVATION

Cold Hollow to Canada works with communities in our seven-town region to promote peer-to-peer collaboration around common conservation goals. We assist communities in the development of local conservation commissions and provide information when they are developing their town plans and by-laws. With CHC's help, Enosburgh and Montgomery have created town conservation funds that may be dovetailed with the CHC conservation fund for greater conservation incentive. CHC regularly hosts events on our own and with our partners that reach citizens throughout the region. Our quarterly newsletter, Connections, goes out to our members and is available on our website, which also serves as a tool to upload data for our citizen science program. Other organizations across New England have invited the CHC board to share the program's success stories with them.

#### CITIZEN SCIENCE: KEEPING TRACK & WILDCAM PROJECT

The wildlife in our region serve as a natural indicator for the health of our forests. That's why it's important to understand our resident wildlife populations, where they live, how they use different forest habitats, and how they travel across the landscape. CHC has implemented citizen science projects including **Keeping Track<sup>®</sup> and a WildCam** monitoring project.

The Keeping Track monitoring program was developed by Susan Morse of Richmond, VT, to inspire community participation in the stewardship of wildlife habitat. It provides technical training so community members can detect, record, and monitor the status of wildlife and habitat in their communities. The teams in our region now monitor selected areas on a seasonal basis to identify and monitor for resident populations of black bear, moose, lynx, bobcat, cougar, river otter, mink, fisher, timber wolf and American marten. The data collected from the transects will be shared with the Forest Ecosystem Monitoring Cooperative and analyzed every five years to develop a trend analysis of mammal residency and movement in the core blocks.

The WildCam Project has been deployed in seven locations using remote game cameras as a means of monitoring. Photos are collected over time and shared with our partner, the Vermont Fish & Wildlife Department. The cameras are mostly located on the Keeping Track transects to augment and enhance the data collected there. These photos are also used to share the value and beauty of wildlife in our area with the public.



#### SUCCESS STORY: LYNX, MARTEN STUDY

In 2018, we teamed up with the Vermont Fish & Wildlife Department (F&W) to overlap our existing citizen science project for wildlife monitoring, Keeping Track, with F&W's study to monitor for lynx and marten in our region. CHC citizen scientists were trained to follow F&W's protocol for the study and seven cameras were installed on a grid pattern across the region. With these cameras, CHC continues to collect and provide F&W with important baseline data on species of greatest conservation need, including lynx and marten.



## 2021-2025 ACTION PLAN: COMMUNITY EMPOWERMENT

Equipping local communities with tools to advance forest resiliency, community well-being, and environmental justice, in partnership with local, regional, and international conservation organizations

#### OUR GOAL

Community members work together through a self-directed, grassroots approach to collectively protect the forests of the Cold Hollow to Canada region.

#### OUR PLANS

- Host land-based visioning exercises with Belvidere and Waterville communities
- Support the communities within our seven-town region in future land use planning and conservation activities
- Host regular community gatherings around conservation topics
- Share stories and news with greater community through our quarterly newsletters, Connections
- Build a database for Keeping Track

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## WHO WE WORK WITH

Cold Hollow to Canada is considered a Regional Conservation Partnership and acts as a nexus between its grassroots members, such as individual landowners and citizens, conservation commissions, and local sport and recreation groups, and the larger conservation organizations and government agencies across our state and region. To accomplish our vision for our region's future, we must build connections within our community and reach out beyond. The Staying Connected Initiative 2 Countries, 1 Forest Regional Conservation Partnerships

**State Agencies** 

**Vermont Land Trust** 

The Nature Conservancy

Towns Conservation Commissions Landowners General Public

We acknowledge that the land encompassing the CHC region has served as a gathering place for indigenous people for thousands of years and is home to the Western Abenaki People. We honor, recognize, and respect the Abenaki as traditional inhabitants of these lands and waters. In that spirit, we acknowledge that we are here as guests on this land, with a rich history pre-dating European settlement. We have much to learn from indigenous traditions as we carry forward our work implementing this strategic plan as members of this shared community.

#### **OUR COMMUNITIES**

Bakersfield, Belvidere, Enosburgh, Fletcher, Montgomery, Richford & Waterville

#### CONSERVATION COMMISSIONS

Bakersfield Conservation Commission Enosburgh Conservation Commission Montgomery Conservation Commission Richford Conservation Commission

#### **OUR TOP FUNDERS**

Farnsworth Fund The High Meadows Fund Jessie B. Cox Charitable Trust Lintilhac Foundation Natural Resources Conservation Service The Nature Conservancy US Forest Service Vermont Agency of Natural Resources Vermont Land Trust Vermont Natural Resource Council

#### **OUR PARTNERS**

2 Countries, 1 Forest Audubon Vermont The Nature Conservancy The Staying Connected Initiative The Trust for Public Land University of Vermont Vermont Department of Forests, Parks, & Recreation Vermont Fish & Wildlife Department Vermont Land Trust Vermont Natural Resource Council Wildlands Network

#### ADDITIONAL COLLABORATORS

Appalachian Corridor Appalachien Champlain Adirondack Biosphere Network Keeping Track Missisquoi River Basin Association Northeast Wilderness Trust Northern Forest Canoe Trail Ruiter Valley Land Trust Vermont Wild and Scenic Rivers



I support CHC because

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Shorld not have border

CONNECTED !!!

(OH MT!) IN MY BACKYARD. #ColdHollowtoCanada





COLD HOLLOW

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