

**MANAGEMENT PLAN
SAUNDERS RIVER ACCESS
NEW HAVEN RIVER**

TOWN OF BRISTOL, VERMONT

BCC APPROVED DRAFT – February 14, 2020

**Prepared by:
VERMONT RIVER CONSERVANCY**

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BACKGROUND:

The “Saunders River Access Property”, consists of two previously separate properties called “Saunders” (northerly) and “Fuller” (southerly). Combined as one management unit in February 2020, they became jointly called the “Saunders River Access Property” and include approximately 54.8 acres of riparian land along both sides of the New Haven River for a total river frontage of approximately 5,748 feet (see attached Management Plan Map). The joint properties are comprised of riparian forest, early succession agricultural fields, river cobble bars, mapped Class-2 channel-contiguous wetlands, and hay fields.

Saunders property background: The Saunders Family has historically farmed this land and been witness to the occasional and intense flooding, erosion, and lateral migration of the New Haven River. Channel migration from Tropical Storm Irene in August 2011 threated adjacent houses with the new proximity of the New Haven River. In part to help protect these houses from future river channel movements, and in part to relieve the Saunders of the risks of this actively flooding cropland, the Town of Bristol agreed to become the parcel’s owner after root-wad bank stabilization, riparian buffer plantings, and a conservation easement were in place. The Vermont River Conservancy assisted with the funding acquisition and restoration management, and it now co-holds the Grant of Development Rights, Conservation Restrictions and Public Access Easement (Oct. 2013) with the Vermont Housing and Conservation Board. The property is managed for public access for anglers and walkers, and the Saunders have life-time rights agreement with the Town of Bristol to continue haying outside the buffer area.

Fuller background: Vermont River Conservancy worked with landowner Paul Fuller and the USDA NRCS Conservation Reserve Program and Vermont Agency of Agriculture to plant the cornfields flooded by Tropical Storm Irene with native trees and shrubs, and then with the VT Agency of Natural Resources Department of Environmental Conservation to conserve the 14.7 acres with a River Corridor Easement in 2013. The Town of Bristol expressed interest in acquiring the parcel when it was listed for sale and removed from the Conservation Reserve Program in 2019. VRC will simultaneously hold the River Corridor Easement with VT ANR, DEC as a 3rd party beneficiary (July 2013) and co-hold a Grant of Development Rights, Conservation Restrictions and Public Access Easement with VHCB (March 2020). Benefits of Town ownership include attenuating flood impacts by keeping the established trees and shrubs growing and preventing it from reverting to cropland, storing nutrients and soils, and expanding public access along the New Haven. It will now be managed jointly with the Saunders River Access parcel under this management plan, but no agriculture will be allowed on the Fuller parcel.

Additional property details describing ecological and site use conditions with map and photo documentation in attached VRC Saunders & Fuller Baseline Documentation Reports.

DEVELOPMENT OF MANAGEMENT PLAN:

Major funding for the purchase and conservation of the Property comes from a grant from the Vermont Housing and Conservation Board (VHCB). One of the grant conditions requires the execution of a ***Grant of Development Rights, Conservation Restrictions and Public Access Easement*** (Easement) held jointly by the Vermont River Conservancy (VRC) and the Vermont Housing and Conservation Board (VHCB). The Easement requires creation of an “Interim Management Plan” to guide the use of the conserved property for an initial period. The Easement provides guidance for the content of the Management Plan as follows (from Section I.B.):

B. Management Plans.

Grantor will, in conjunction with Grantee VRC, from time-to-time, develop comprehensive Management Plans, including updates, revisions and amendments, for the Protected Property (hereafter “Management Plan”). The Management Plan shall:

- 1. Provide for the use and management of the Protected Property in a fashion which is consistent with the Purposes of this Grant, including, but not limited to, providing for accommodations that address the anticipated equilibrium conditions and associated physical adjustment processes of the River, as well as, minimizing future conflicts between the anticipated physical adjustment processes of the River and incompatible land use and channel management activities on the Protected Property; and,*
- 2. Be designed to provide reasonable public access to recreational values and opportunities associated with the Protected Property; and,*
- 3. Be consistent with the purpose of conserving biological diversity, wildlife habitat, natural communities and the ecological processes that sustain these natural resource values of the Protected Property; and,*
- 4. Otherwise be consistent with the terms and conditions of this Grant.*

Prior to the final adoption of each Management Plan, including updates, revisions and amendments, Grantor shall: (a) secure appropriate public input from the general public; (b) develop the Management Plan in a timely and responsive manner; and, (c) provide Grantees with a copy of each such Management Plan, as well as, a copy of each final adopted Management Plan.

The Vermont River Conservancy has coordinated the drafting of this initial Management Plan with input from the Town of Bristol Conservation Commission. This Management Plan replaces the Saunders Interim Management Plan, and treats the two Town owned parcels (Saunders and Fuller) as one management unit.

The Management Plan will be reviewed on an annual basis. The Vermont River Conservancy will meet as needed with the Town of Bristol Conservation Commission in November to review use of the property and discuss any issues related to public access and land management. The Vermont River Conservancy and Town of Bristol Conservation Commission will recommend any changes to the Management Plan to the Town of Bristol (the landowner), and changes will be reviewed and adopted by the Town of Bristol Selectboard as needed.

CURRENT CONDITIONS:

The Saunders River Access Property has enjoyed low impact public use since 2013. Road frontage is in the northern field, approximately 300 feet on Vermont Route 116, including a field access farm road. There is a separate right-of-way access point south of this road frontage, a shared driveway that also leads to #1249 South 116 Rd. Much of the property is underlain by soils of statewide and prime agricultural importance. The New Haven River adjacent to the Protected Property is managed as a brown trout fishery (VT Fish & Wildlife).

A kiosk along the riparian buffer is not visible from the road or right-of-way entrance, and therefore access is mostly limited to neighbors and people who already know about the property. The Saunders maintain the hay fields, keeping invasive species at bay in the fields. The floating 50' riparian buffer is growing up, and a small foot path is visible on the field side of the buffer. Anglers and neighbors are the site's primary visitors.

The Fuller's allowed a neighbor to use a horse trail through the fallow field, thus keeping a narrow walking path open, although the vegetative regrowth, invasive species, and beaver activity make the path difficult to find or navigate during fully-vegetated summer conditions. The CREP trees and shrubs planted in 2013 in the fallow corn field are maturing, and the mature floodplain forest along the New Haven River contains towering silver maples and a diverse understory. Japanese Knotweed and Honeysuckle are prevalent throughout.

MANAGEMENT RESPONSIBILITIES:

The Town of Bristol is the **landowner**, and the Bristol Conservation Commission agrees to be the primary **Site Manager**. Vermont River Conservancy is the **Conservation Easement holder**, and agrees to annually monitor the property for easement compliance, report to Saunders & Fuller easement co-holder VHCB and Fuller easement 3rd party VT DEC annually, and to provide assistance with management responsibilities, including grant writing and technical assistance.

Primary Contacts:

Town of Bristol (Landowner) = Valerie Capels, Town Administrator, (802) 453-2410

Vermont River Conservancy (Easement co-holder) = Lydia Menendez Parker, Assistant Director, (802) 229-0820, lydia@vermontriverconservancy.org

Town of Bristol Conservation Commission (Site Manager) = Kristen Underwood, (802) 453-3076
southmountain@gmavt.net

Vermont Housing Conservation Board (Saunders & Fuller Easement co-holders) = Mark Martin,
Conservation Stewardship Coordinator, (802) 828-5068

VT Agency of Natural Resources, Department of Environment Conservation, River Management
Program (Fuller property Easement 3rd party beneficiary) = Shannon Pytlik, River Scientist,
(802) 490-6158

Such management will include:

- 1) An annual meeting with the landowner to review the use of the Property over the past year and to identify any issues or opportunities for revision of site management activities. Based on the results of the annual meetings, any agreed upon revisions to this Management Plan will be made.
- 2) A volunteer “Site Steward” will be recruited, identified, and overseen by the Site Manager. The Site Steward will provide local response to any issues or questions that arise from use of the Property. The Site Steward will inspect the property on a monthly basis from May to September for any improper use, keep the Property clean of refuse, and generally be the “eyes and ears” for the Site Manager. If issues arise, the Site Steward will contact the Site Manager.
- 3) Issues, either discovered by or brought to the attention of the Site Manager or Easement Holder, will be handled in a timely manner appropriate to their severity. Records of issues and their resolutions will be maintained by the Easement Holder and shared with appropriate parties, such as easement co-holders or beneficiaries, the landowner, Site Manager and Site Steward, neighboring landowners, users and visitors to the property.
- 4) Vermont River Conservancy will monitor easement conditions once annually as easement steward, and VHCB and VT ANR shall be consulted per the terms of the VRC/VHCB and VRC/DEC Stewardship MOUs, respectively.

MANAGEMENT ACTIVITIES:

GOAL A: Provide Public Access to the New Haven River for individuals and small groups of anglers, paddlers, and walkers.

- 1) **Naming of Property:** In honor and recognition of the Saunders Family, the property is named “Saunders River Access.”

- 2) **Signage:**
 - a. **Kiosk:** A small sign board is installed near the river and along the footpath to notify users of site conditions, user etiquette, contact information for site management, and listing of project partners and funders.
 - b. **Wayfinding signs:** Signage may be installed to be visible from Route 116 to make property and entrance more visible. Any necessary sign permits will be obtained. Sign design will be compatible and consistent when possible with VRC and Town of Bristol signage. Additional informational signage may be installed as needed along footpaths.
 - c. **Educational signs:** Site interpretation signage may be installed to inform and educate visitors about the land use history, natural history, and river science that make this site special.
- 3) **Parking:** If “Saunders River Access” signage on Route 116 is installed, THEN dusk to dawn parking for 3 to 6 cars will be located on a gravel lot near the curb cut with Rt 116 along the northern property boundary, with the parking area delineated by a barrier (ie. boulders or fence) if needed. Until the time when or if signage on Route 116 is installed, low frequency visitors may park vehicles near the kiosk so long as no negative impact to the soils, hay crop, or buffer vegetation occurs. Barriers and gravel may be installed to keep cars in designated parking area and to reduce rutting.
- 4) **Trails:** A narrow walking path 3-4 feet in width may be maintained with light pruning, mowing or weed whacking, if foot traffic is insufficient to keep it navigable.
- 5) **Dogs:** Dogs are allowed on site, and must be on a leash or under control of their owner, per Town of Bristol Dog ordinance. All pet waste must be picked up and removed from the property by the dog owner.
- 6) **Litter / Trash:** No trash receptacles will be provided on site. All visitors must carry out any waste they brought with them according to Leave No Trace guidelines, and will be encouraged to pick up any additional litter they find. Site Steward will remove any small litter or debris during regular spring through fall visits. Site Steward will notify Site Manager and Site Partner if any larger trash items are found, and Site Manager will coordinate removal of larger items.
- 7) **Vehicles:** No motorized vehicles allowed beyond designated parking area. Bikes, while not anticipated in large numbers, must stay on designated trail. Landowner may permit motorized personal assistive mobility devices, per the Easement. Emergency response vehicles may access property, per the Easement. Large equipment may access property only if needed for site restoration / property management purposes after flood damage, and only if authorized by landowner and all parties to the Easements: VRC, VHCB and ANR. See Easements for details. The Saunders family has an agreement with the Town of Bristol for life-time rights to hay the Saunders property (outside the Buffer area) with the necessary agricultural equipment.
- 8) **Picnic Tables:** A picnic table may be installed near the river, outside the vegetated Buffer, in a grassy open area that doesn’t interfere with the Saunders haying operations. It should be securely anchored, as flooding could easily carry a picnic table downstream. Prior to installing a picnic table, the Bristol Selectboard will be consulted to discuss proper maintenance of the area.

- 9) **Picnic Area:** Site Manager and Site Partner will recruit a volunteer Site Steward or, with Town Selectboard approval, a contractor, to mow or weed whack around the picnic table (but not within the Buffer area) monthly in May, June, July and August.
- 10) **Camping / Campfires:** Camping and campfires are not allowed unless permission is obtained in advance from the landowner. Campers intending to have a campfire must bring their own wood to ensure the existing woody vegetation is not cut or burned. Human waste must be disposed of per landowner's permission rules, and not within the riparian Buffer area.
- 11) **Loitering / Squatting:** No public access is allowed between dusk and dawn. Trespassers between dusk and dawn will be handled according to the Town's Trespass Ordinance.
- 12) **Privy:** No moldering privy will be installed at this time. Future need for proper disposal of human waste will be assessed and considered.
- 13) **Plowing:** No plowing will occur along the farm lane or parking area. The property will be managed as a three season river access park, not inclusive of winter. Winter visitors are allowed, but no provisions will be made for them.
- 14) **Hazardous trees / plants:** Any hazardous trees that pose a safety concern to humans using the designated trail or river access will be pruned or felled to reduce risk and left on the property as woody debris. Any hazardous plants (such as poison ivy) that pose a safety concern to humans using the designated trail or river access will be controlled, removed or adequately marked with warning/danger signage.

GOAL B: Create and manage ecologically effective riparian buffers and floodplains along the New Haven River.

The right to manage vegetation within the Riparian Buffer Zone (50 feet from the top of the bank of the New Haven River) by the Vermont River Conservancy is established in the Easements. The recent history of the volatile nature of the New Haven River as it flows through the property makes it very difficult to predict where the river channel may exist from one year to the next. Because of the importance of establishing robust vegetative cover to stabilize the alluvial soils on the property and provide natural resistance to lateral migration of the river channel the entire forested portion of the property is included as part of the Riparian Buffer Zone.

- 1) **Buffer Vegetation:** The Easements require a minimum 50' vegetated buffer along the New Haven River. Existing native vegetation will be protected, and any additional plantings may help establish more native vegetation, and will be protected. The Fuller parcel will be managed entirely as vegetated Buffer, with no agriculture or silviculture allowed, to ensure that the 2013 CREP plantings fully mature. Future buffer plantings are allowed to improve the native forest composition and age diversity.
- 2) **Invasive Species:** The New Haven River corridor has extensive populations of non-native invasive species.

- a. Eradication of honeysuckle, Japanese knotweed and other invasive species is not likely or within the scope and resources of the landowner, site manager and conservation easement holder. Control and management efforts were undertaken between 2013 – 2018, and will be monitored for effectiveness. Mechanical or chemical control of any invasive species may be considered, and if deemed appropriate, a treatment plan will be developed, reviewed and approved by landowner, Site Manager and Conservation Easement Holder, and enacted by Site Manager with support from the Conservation Easement Holder.
 - b. Emerald Ash Borer is present in Vermont, and will likely decimate significant numbers of Ash trees. Ash trees are present throughout the New Haven River watershed, and can be found on the Saunders & Fuller properties. No management, removal or inoculation of Ash trees is planned, since risk to infrastructure (e.g., power lines, roadways) and public health & safety is deemed minimal at this time, and because there are significant ecological benefits of woody debris in riparian corridors and floodplains.
- 3) **Trail Maintenance:** A narrow walking path 3-4 feet in width located outside the Buffer area may be maintained with light pruning, mowing or weed whacking, if foot traffic is insufficient to keep it navigable. If informal, braiding walking paths are formed from visitor use, Site Manager may block off trails if they degrade soils or damage buffer vegetation.
- 4) **Flooding / Storm Damage:** This property can be dramatically altered by storms and floods. Public access infrastructure (parking area and trails) may be modified if needed and within the terms of the Easement, and is secondary to the ecological function of the property. Reasonable efforts may be made to restore the Saunders parcel to pre-flood conditions for the purpose of maintaining the Town of Bristol agricultural lease, but only if in support of the purposes of the Easement and in adherence to its terms. Site Manager will seek approval for any necessary flood restoration efforts from the Conservation Easement holder, who may grant approval only with support from VHCB and VT ANR, per VRC Stewardship MOU and easement terms.
- 5) **Agriculture:** Agricultural use of the existing hayfield on the Saunders parcel between the New Haven River and Rte 116 will be continued under an agreement between the Town of Bristol and Alan and Todd Saunders. The area of agricultural use will be subject to a 50 foot buffer of permanent vegetation measured from the top of the bank of the active and inactive channels of the New Haven River. No agricultural use is allowed on the Fuller parcel.

GOAL C: Maintain good relations with community, neighbors, and visitors.

Site Manager will make periodic efforts to communicate with neighbors to inquire about site conditions, questions, issues, or concerns. Conservation Easement holder will monitor boundaries annually to uphold terms of the Easement.

A user survey sign (with an online survey address) may be posted to encourage visitors to share feedback about their use of and experience at the property with the Site Managers and Conservation Easement Holder.

MANAGEMENT COSTS:

The Site Manager will be responsible for raising any funds necessary for ongoing maintenance of the Property. Fundraising support or in-kind donations from the Conservation Easement Holder are welcome to help keep projects affordable and expedited.

Signature Page:

This Management Plan is agreed to by:

Duly authorized representative of Vermont River Conservancy

Date

Duly authorized representative of the Town of Bristol

Date

Duly authorized representative of the Bristol Conservation Commission

Date

ATTACHMENTS:

Management Plan Map

Saunders Baseline Documentation Report

Fuller Baseline Documentation Report



The Vermont River Conservancy (VRC) is a statewide, non-profit 501 (c) (3) organization supported by people who believe the protection of exceptional water-related lands is essential to the quality of life in Vermont

Vermont River Conservancy

Saunders River Access Area

Town of Bristol

