

Interview with Agency of Natural Resources Secretary Deb Markowitz

These questions are a condensed representation of the questions that VECAN conferences attendees asked of Secretary Markowitz but time limitations failed to allow her to answer. Many thanks to Secretary Markowitz for following up and answering these questions.

For more information on the ANR or to follow up on anything specific, check out the ANR web site <http://www.anr.state.vt.us/> or contact Secretary Markowitz here: <http://www.anr.state.vt.us/site/html/contact.htm>.

We need micro-hydro – what is the future of it in VT? Will the state allow micro hydro?

We have a number of micro hydro sites that are successful around the state and we are supportive of them continuing. The question is whether there are other sites around Vermont that would support micro hydro development - and that requires a site by site look. When you put in dam, there is an impact both upstream and down on wildlife habitat that could be meaningful. At ANR, our job is to analyze those impacts and take them into account as part of the permit process.

A bill to limit 10,000 + or greater truck idling has been introduced in the legislation for at least 6 years with no progress. Can we count on ANR to move regulation forward instead?

I don't have enough information right now on what we are doing internally or what our regulatory authority is on this, but please call down to our Air Division to explore that further.

How will you encourage the Climate Cabinet to exceed the plan goals?

The Climate Cabinet is actually focused on achieving the plan's goals, and it's a pretty ambitious set of goals. We have already formed four subcommittees to focus on meeting those goals. One focus is on transportation and electric vehicles. Another committee will be looking at land use issues, particularly those that are so important post Irene (such as smart growth and flood plans). The third committee is focused on state government and what we that state can do to reduce its own greenhouse gas emissions. Our fourth committee is focused on technical issues, to develop performance measures, modeling and to collect data so that we can hold ourselves accountable as we move towards achieving the goals set out in the CEP.

We are also planning to roll out a public engagement process because one of the things that Commissioner Miller and I know is that our ambitious goals can't be accomplished through government action alone. We need the involvement of communities – and especially the town energy committees to be a part of this. I encourage all of you to be as involved in this process moving forward as possible.

Since climate issues are the purview of the ANR, why isn't energy efficiency/renewables etc. located there?

That's a good question, but I don't have an answer for it. In Vermont it's historically been the Department of Public Service in charge of the energy planning process. Other states have merged energy into their natural resources agency, but we not looking to do that in Vermont at this time. That being said, Commissioner Miller and I are working very closely together on the energy plan and we will be continuing to work together as we implement the plan.

I've heard that the climate work at ANR does not have dedicated funding. If true what's being done to change this? What can we do?

We do have a climate team at ANR with various sources of funding but we are definitely looking to strengthen that part of the operation. We are still facing a significant budget deficit in Vermont so we don't have a specific plan for increasing funding for our climate initiatives this year, but we are definitely looking to ensure a sustainable source of funding for our climate team in the future.

You stated that transportation is the most important goal. Why then are we investing so much at the great cost to our environment to construct industrial wind on mountain ridges? Isn't that an unwise investment of our resources? Please specify what ANR is doing to create regulatory tools for 1) water mitigation 2) blasting on mountaintops.

I believe that transportation is one of the greatest challenges we will face because we are a rural state. One of the ways to address this will be through electric vehicles, which means we need to do what we can to make sure that we are generating electricity using low carbon means – like large scale wind. Under Section 401 of the Clean Water Act we do have a regulatory program that deals with protecting water quality and stormwater runoff. So far that program has worked well. As in any large construction project, we continue to monitor the work done to ensure the requirements of the permit and being met. So far we've been pleased. All blasting is being conducted by licensed and certified technicians and is being done in accordance with the requirements of federal law and the Vermont Public Service Board's CPG.

Does it make sense to have wind? As the Governor said recently when the final energy plan was announced in order for us to get off our addiction to fossil fuels we need to commit to renewable energy and that includes five sources -- wind, water, woods, sun and fields. So wind power is part of mix, and the Public Service Board process is one of balancing potential harm to the environment with the public good.

How do we incentivize good private sector renewable energy development while also maintaining quality, open public input and environmental restrictions? How do we strike that balance?

The CEP is a really good start because the first thing we need to do is articulate what our goals are as a state and that will inform PSB decision on what constitutes the 'public good.' When we have large-scale development of any kind, people will disagree if it's the best course of action. Right now our legal process helps us balance those issues, whether that's through a permit issued by ANR or a Certificate of Public Good issued by the Public Service Board. One way the public and our town energy committees can be helpful is to work with the people in your community to ensure you have a real voice at the table, whether you are for or against a particular project because there are local impacts no matter how we are generating our energy.