

## **Hardwick Buyout Program – Progress and Reflections from Rural Vermont**

Following the July 2023 flooding, the Town of Hardwick initiated a series of voluntary property buyouts to reduce long-term flood risk and support residents who had experienced repeated losses. To date, the Town has successfully closed ten buyouts — four through the Flood Resilient Communities Fund (FRCF) and six through FEMA's Hazard Mitigation Grant Program (HMGP). Each property has a corresponding flood-mitigation plan designed to ensure that the land contributes to community safety and long-term resilience.

An additional ten properties from the 2024 flood events are now in process: seven with FEMA, two through FRCF, and one pending closing. These properties, like the earlier group, represent homes that had sustained multiple flood damages over the years. The Town's approach has prioritized transparency, careful analysis, and collaboration at every stage.

All of the former property owners have chosen to remain in the local region, relocating to nearby towns such as Calais, Greensboro, Eden, and Craftsbury. Many have built or purchased smaller, more efficient homes, and none are located in floodplains or river corridors — confirmed through multiple model reviews prior to purchase. Each participant has expressed relief and gratitude to be able to move forward.

Importantly, many participants made their decisions not only for themselves, but with their neighbors and community in mind. Several expressed that they did not want future buyers to experience the same losses they had endured. They considered the safety of the community as a whole when agreeing to the buyout and have since asked what will follow on the acquired properties and how those spaces might serve to protect adjacent homes in future flood events. Their choices were not made lightly; for many, the process was emotionally difficult and deeply personal.

In Hardwick, we often speak of grit — the persistence to recover, rebuild, and adapt in the face of hardship. At first, accepting a buyout can feel like the opposite of that narrative, almost as if one is giving up. Throughout this process, the Town has worked intentionally to reframe that perception. Choosing a buyout is not an act of defeat; it is an act of strength, foresight, and community care. It represents a collective understanding that resilience sometimes means stepping back from the river so that both people and the river can recover.

The Town has also worked to communicate clearly about the purpose and benefits of the buyout program. Nonetheless, we have heard concerns that property buyouts are to blame for recent increases in property taxes. It is essential to clarify that it was the flooding itself, not the buyout program, that affected the Town's grand list. The buyouts mitigate that impact over time by preventing repeated losses and reducing future public costs associated with emergency response and infrastructure repair.

Vermont urgently needs housing, but it must be safe housing — homes that do not place families in harm's way or perpetuate the trauma of repeated flooding. Hardwick's buyout work supports that larger statewide goal by helping residents move out of high-risk areas and restoring the natural floodplain functions that protect the community as a whole.

Hardwick's progress reflects the strength of collaboration between local commitment and state partnership. Vermont Emergency Management's steady guidance, responsiveness, and trust have been instrumental throughout this process. Their support has helped Hardwick navigate the technical, financial, and emotional complexities of recovery while setting the groundwork for long-term resilience. The Town is deeply grateful for VEM's partnership and looks forward to continuing this shared work—building communities that are safer, stronger, and better prepared for the challenges ahead.

With gratitude,  
Kristen Leahy  
Zoning and Floodplain Administrator  
Resilience & Adaptation Coordinator