



Johanna Miller is outreach director and energy program co-director for the Vermont Natural Resources Council in Montpelier. The VNRC is a statewide nonprofit that works to promote vibrant communities, healthy downtowns, clean and abundant fresh water, working farms and forests, wild and majestic places and a clean, green, renewable energy future. EMILY McMANAMY, Free Press

## 'The climate-change conundrum is like nothing we have ever known'

**I** believe in the laws of nature, the power of people and our capacity for innovation and leadership.

I also believe there is no more important time for these characteristics to converge in an intentional and bold way. That's because I believe we face a challenge unmatched in human history: climate change.

Beyond the warmer, weirder and wilder weather patterns I have witnessed in my 34 years, my belief is supported by leading climate scientists, including NASA's James Hansen, who urge serious action to reduce carbon in the atmosphere to 350 parts per million or risk potentially catastrophic consequences.

To help avoid the likely impacts of climate change — increased drought and water-borne diseases, extreme weather events, sea-level rise and diminished snow and rainfall among them — people are galvanizing in unprecedented ways. And Vermonters are leading the charge.

### Johanna Miller

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Just last weekend, on Oct. 24, the world witnessed the largest unified environmental demonstration ever in the International Day of Climate Action. In more than 180 countries and 5,200 events, people catapulted one number — 350 — into the public sphere to raise broad awareness, set the number as the essential benchmark and instigate needed political action to achieve this climate-stabilizing imperative.

At the center of this massive international demonstration was Vermont's own climate crusader Bill McKibben and an intrepid group of recent Middlebury College graduates.

The climate movement that convened across the world Oct. 24 has its roots in Vermont. It started in 2006 with McKibben, concerned Vermonters and organizations including mine, the Vermont Natural Resources Council, on a five-day walk from Middlebury to Burlington to raise awareness about climate change (culminating in the largest demonstration to date in the United States about the issue).

From there, it spiraled into 1,400 "Step It Up" events in 2007 calling on Congress to reduce greenhouse-gas emissions 80 percent by 2050. And last weekend it concluded in the historic happenings of the International Day of Climate Action, where the number 350 transcended boundaries, languages and barriers to create a unifying, international line in the sand.

McKibben and the 350.org team are a great example of the power of people. Their story is one of the reasons I love Vermont. Our democracy is strong. People take action. And important issues — in this case the health of our planet and the people who inhabit it — seem to move more easily from conversations and concerns to actions and solutions.

One of the most inspiring groups of Vermonters I know that reflect the power of people focused on a shared goal is the growing network of community energy committees.

Across the Green Mountains, there are now almost 90 of these primarily volunteer grassroots groups. Through my work at VNRC, which is a founding partner in the Vermont Energy and Climate Action Network, I am lucky enough to work with many of them. Gathering in churches, town offices, living rooms and beyond, town energy committees are helping to shape important dialogues, shave expensive energy loads, spur the transition to renewables and lower the carbon emissions that are con-

tributing to climate change.

Last June, for example, the Middlesex Energy Committee helped organize what they coined a "21st Century Barn Raising." Like building a barn by the hands of friends and neighbors, the intensive, largely volunteer-driven weatherization of one of the town's biggest energy users, the elementary school, was no small feat. But the results are impressive. Organizers estimate their two-day effort will save the school 2,000 to 2,500 gallons of fuel oil a year.

Right next door, Waterbury's energy committee, called the Local Energy Action Partnership, is working with community officials to build support and secure funding for solar installations on both the middle and elementary schools. The goal? Raise awareness about the benefits of renewable energy, help the schools cut their carbon emissions and reduce the school's (and therefore area taxpayers') energy bills.

Farther north, the Hardwick Energy Action Team and the Hardwick Area Transition Town are co-convening a public dialogue Nov. 15 to craft a long-range energy plan and assess how they can reduce their community's collective carbon footprint.

These are just a few examples of the good things that are growing at Vermont's grassroots. Individually, they are great community strides. Needed progress, powered by people. Together, this grassroots energy and climate action is transformative.

That's because this local leadership also is trickling up, helping to create the synergy and opportunities we so desperately need to meet the challenge before us. Grassroots leadership is emboldening climate champions, such as Sen. Bernie Sanders, to press even harder. This leadership also is bolder, making skeptics to greater account for prioritizing polluting, dwindling energy sources over clean, plentiful, renewable supplies.

I'm grateful for Vermonters' leadership on this issue, because I believe the climate-change conundrum is like nothing we have ever known.

I also believe our state is an incubator for innovation, entrepreneurship and influential civic action. From our small but powerful position in Vermont's Green Mountains, I believe this state — powered by the people who live here — is uniquely poised to continue harnessing our Yankee ingenuity to help ensure this planet and its people meet the greatest global challenge the world has ever faced.

### What do you BELIEVE?

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