

STATE OF VERMONT
PUBLIC UTILITY COMMISSION

Case No. 23-2220-RULE

Proceeding to design the potential Clean Heat Standard	
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Order entered: 01/24/2024

ORDER GRANTING CONFIDENTIAL TREATMENT OF REGISTRATION INFORMATION

I. INTRODUCTION

Under Act 18, the Affordable Heat Act,¹ each entity that sells heating fuel into or in Vermont must register with the Vermont Public Utility Commission (“Commission”) annually.² The Commission has devised a registration form and online portal for collecting this information. The registration information is intended to allow the Commission to determine whether a registrant would be considered an obligated party under the Clean Heat Standard—an entity that is required to obtain or create clean heat credits—and, if the Clean Heat Standard is adopted, the amount of an obligated party’s annual clean heat credit requirement.

The content of the registration form and the publication of the registration information are prescribed by Act 18. First, the Commission must share the obligated parties’ information with the Vermont Agency of Natural Resources (“ANR”) and the Vermont Department of Public Service (“Department”) for purposes of updating the Vermont Greenhouse Gas Emissions Inventory and Forecast and meeting the requirements of 10 V.S.A. § 591(b)(3).³ Second, the Commission must maintain “a list of registered entities on its website that contains the required registration information.”⁴

Global Partners LP, the Vermont Fuel Dealers Association (“VFDA”), and Vermont Gas Systems, Inc. (“VGS”) allege that required registration information about suppliers, customers, and fuel purchased and sold should be kept confidential. Further, the VFDA contends that requiring each registering entity to apply individually for confidential treatment would be unduly

¹ Public Act 18 (2023 Vt., Bien. Sess.) (“Act 18”).

² See 30 V.S.A. § 8124(b).

³ 30 V.S.A. § 8124(b)(3).

⁴ 30 V.S.A. § 8124(b)(4).

burdensome and have requested that the Commission issue an order waiving public disclosure of volumetric information and the identities of supplier and client businesses.

On December 15, 2023, the Commission requested legal briefing on whether we have the legal authority to give confidential treatment of information gathered from entities that sell fuel into and in Vermont during registration as required by Act 18. Legal briefs were filed by the VFDA, VGS, ANR, and the Department.

In today's Order, we grant the request to treat the volumetric information and the identities of supplier and client businesses as confidential.

II. POSITIONS OF THE PARTIES

The VFDA and VGS, on behalf of registrants, argue that the Commission should protect volumetric information and the identities of supplier and client businesses as confidential. VGS argues that “competitively sensitive usage volumes associated with specific customers and other transactional details that are (1) generally kept secret, and (2) provide a business advantage to the owner are not generally subject to public inspection,” and, therefore, qualify under the “trade secrets” exemption to the Vermont Public Records Act.⁵ The VFDA also argues that the Commission should find that this information qualifies as a trade secret under 1 V.S.A. § 317(c)(9) and should protect it as confidential.

The Department argues that the Commission does not have the legal authority to issue a blanket order keeping the annual registration data confidential under the Public Records Act, both on the grounds that an exemption to the Public Records Act does not apply to the registration form and because application of the Public Records Act requires additional, case-specific information. ANR does not take a position on whether the information should be protected as confidential but highlights the necessity for sharing the data under Section 8124(b)(3) and states that ANR would abide by the terms of a protective order if the Commission deems the information confidential.

III. DISCUSSION

The Commission has been asked to hold as confidential the information filed on the registration forms that concerns volumetric information and the identities of supplier and client businesses. A determination regarding this request proceeds in three steps. First, we examine

⁵ *Brief of Vermont Gas Systems, Inc. Regarding Confidential Business Information* (1/8/24) at 1.

whether the portion of Act 18, codified in 30 V.S.A. § 8124(b), requires the publication of the entire contents of the registration form on the Commission’s website. Second, we evaluate whether designating the information as confidential is consistent with the Public Records Act. Finally, we explain how our determination affects the sharing of information with the Department and ANR.

A. Interpreting the Disclosure Requirements of 30 V.S.A. § 8124

The overarching objective of any “statutory interpretation is to construe and effectuate the legislative intent behind a statute.”⁶ The first step in any statutory analysis is to look to the plain meaning of the law.⁷ Only if the statute’s language is ambiguous do we go beyond the statutory language to “consider the statute’s subject matter, effects and consequences, as well as the reason for and spirit of the law” and, ultimately, to determine the legislative intent.⁸

Initially, the Commission must examine what information it is required to publish on its website from the registration forms filed by entities complying with 30 V.S.A. § 8124(b). We begin with the language of Section 8124(b)(4), which reads, “[t]he Commission shall maintain, and update annually, a list of registered entities on its website that contains the required registration information.” The statute requires posting a “list of registered entities” rather than the individual registration forms or the full contents of each entity’s registration form. The Legislature could have given a clear directive to post the entire contents of the registration forms or the forms directly but did not use that language. Instead, the emphasis in the statute is on publication of the list of registrants.

Additionally, the phrase “that contains the required registration information” modifies the Commission’s website and not the portion of the statute that refers to the information to be posted. One interpretation of this subsection is that the Commission is required to publish a list of registered entities on its website and that the Commission’s website is also required to contain a section that outlines the required registration information, not the individual registrant’s responses to the categories of required information. An alternative interpretation is that the

⁶ *State v. Hurley*, 2015 VT 46, ¶ 9, 198 Vt. 552, 117 A. 3d 433; see also *In re Programmatic Changes to Standard-Offer Program*, 2014 VT 29, ¶ 9, 196 Vt. 175, 95 A.3d 999 (“Our paramount goal in construing a statute is to give effect to the intent of the Legislature.” (quotation marks and citations omitted)).

⁷ See *Cornelius v. The Chronicle, Inc.*, 2019 VT 4, ¶ 18, 209 Vt. 405, 206 A.3d 710.

⁸ *Northfield Sch. Bd. v. Washington S. Educ. Ass’n*, 2019 VT 26, ¶ 13, 210 Vt. 15, 210 A.3d 460.

Commission must publish all the registration information for each registrant on its website. We therefore find the statutory language ambiguous.⁹

Because Section 8124(b)(4) is ambiguous, the Commission applies the rules of statutory interpretation to construe the statute. To the extent possible, statutes should be harmonized and not read as creating a conflict.¹⁰ Subchapter 3 of Title 1 of the Vermont Statutes Annotated establishes the Vermont Public Records Act. Section 315 states the policy underlying the Public Records Act:

It is the policy of this subchapter to provide for free and open examination of records consistent with Chapter I, Article 6 of the Vermont Constitution. Officers of government are trustees and servants of the people and it is in the public interest to enable any person to review and criticize their decisions even though such examination may cause inconvenience or embarrassment. All people, however, have a right to privacy in their personal and economic pursuits, which ought to be protected unless specific information is needed to review the action of a governmental officer.

The Public Records Act strongly favors the disclosure of government records. However, under the Public Records Act, disclosure of government records is not without exception. Section 317 of the Public Records Act provides 43 exemptions to public disclosure of government records. In support of the request to designate as confidential volumetric information and the identities of supplier and client businesses, the VFDA and VGS have invoked the trade secrets exemption.

Section 8124 does not explicitly acknowledge any exception to publicizing the registration information. However, reading 30 V.S.A. § 8124(b) to require publication of the entire registration form contents would effectively override the exemptions outlined in 1 V.S.A. § 317 because an entity submitting this business information to the Commission would have no protection from disclosure. There is nothing in the language of Section 8124(b) that indicates a legislative intent to repeal potential public disclosure exemptions embodied in the Public

⁹ See *Shires Housing, Inc. v. Brown*, 2017 VT 60, ¶ 14, 205 Vt. 186, 172 A.3d 1215 (concluding that statute is ambiguous when it is “susceptible to more than one interpretation”).

¹⁰ See *In re Snyder Group, Inc.*, 2020 VT 15, ¶ 14, 212 Vt. 168, 233 A.3d 1077 (“When two statutes deal with the same subject matter and one is general and the other special, they must be read together and harmonized if possible to give effect to a consistent legislative policy.” (quotation and citation omitted)).

Records Act in the context of the Affordable Heat Act. Further, the Legislature includes language in the Public Records Act when it intends to avoid application of an exemption.¹¹

For these reasons, we decline to read Section 8124 as an abrogation of the Public Records Act exemptions. Instead, we interpret both statutes to be in harmony.¹² This understanding of Section 8124 is also harmonious with respect to the legislative intent behind the Public Records Act that balances disclosure with other individual rights: “All people, however, have a right to privacy in their personal and economic pursuits, which ought to be protected unless specific information is needed to review the action of a governmental officer.”¹³ The language of Section 8124 requires publication of the list of registrants but does not compel disclosure of the detailed registration information.

Based on the above analysis, we determine that the intent behind Section 8124(b)(4) is to have the Commission publish on its website a list of registered entities. The Commission will do so as soon as practicable after the registration deadline.

B. Vermont’s Public Records Act

A review of Section 8124 does not resolve the question of whether the information in the registration forms should be designated as confidential. To fully answer this question, the Commission must further analyze the requirements of and exemptions to the Public Records Act.

Generally, the Commission resolves disputes about information only when there is a disagreement about its confidential nature.¹⁴ However, even when the request is uncontested, the Commission will review the briefs and averments to ensure that the moving party or parties have presented a *prima facie* case for keeping the documents or information confidential. In

¹¹ See 1 V.S.A. § 317(c)(9) (“except that the disclosures required by 18 V.S.A. § 4632 are not exempt under this subdivision”); 1 V.S.A. § 317(c)(18) (“except as provided in 20 V.S.A. § 1923); 1 V.S.A. § 317(c)(20) (“except as provided in 22 V.S.A. § 761); 1 V.S.A. § 317(c)(29) (“The records in the custody of the Secretary of State of a participant in the Address Confidentiality Program described in 15 V.S.A. chapter 21, subchapter 3, except as provided in that subchapter.”); 1 V.S.A. § 317(c)(38) (“except that the records shall be made available upon request for medical research, consistent with and for purposes expressed in 18 V.S.A. § 4622 or 9410, 18 V.S.A. chapter 84 or 84A, and for other law enforcement activities”); 1 V.S.A. § 317(c)(41) (“except as provided by 13 V.S.A. §§ 5358a(b) and 7043(c)”); 1 V.S.A. § 317(c)(42) (“[e]xcept as otherwise provided by law”).

¹² See *State v. Joseph*, 2017 VT 52, ¶ 14, 205 Vt. 31, 171 A.3d 53 (concluding there was no repeal by implication where statutes could be harmonized).

¹³ 1 V.S.A. § 315(a).

¹⁴ *Investigation into General Order No. 45 Notice filed by Vermont Yankee Nuclear Power Corporation re: proposed sale of Vermont Yankee Nuclear Power Station to Entergy Nuclear Vermont Yankee, LLC*, Docket No. 6545 (“*Entergy Docket*”), Order of 11/9/01 at 6; see also Docket No. 5983, Order of 11/26/97 at 3-4 and cases cited therein.

determining whether to protect allegedly confidential information pursuant to the Public Records Act, the Commission considers three issues:

- (1) Is the matter sought to be protected a trade secret or other confidential research, development, or commercial information which should be protected?
- (2) Would disclosure of such information cause a cognizable harm sufficient to warrant a protective order?
- (3) Has the party seeking protection shown “good cause” for invoking the Commission’s protection?¹⁵

We acknowledge that there are categories of registration information that no parties argue should be kept confidential. Thus, the Commission will not designate as confidential the following: the entity’s legal name; doing-business-as name, if applicable; municipality in which the entity is located; state in which the entity is located; primary contact person for the business and the contact information provided; and secondary contact person for the business and the contact information provided.¹⁶ The information at issue is: the information responsive to the questions regarding heating fuel overview; the heating fuel detail by type imported into Vermont; the heating fuel detail by type produced, refined, manufactured, or compounded for sale in Vermont; and the heating fuel detail by type sold.¹⁷

As mentioned above, the VFDA and VGS argue that this information is a trade secret, invoking an exemption to the Public Records Act.

1. Trade Secrets

Pursuant to 1 V.S.A. § 317(c)(9), trade secrets are exempt from public disclosure. “Trade secrets” are defined, in relevant part, as “confidential business records or information . . . which a commercial concern makes efforts that are reasonable under the circumstances to keep secret, and which gives its user or owner an opportunity to obtain business advantage over competitors who do not know it or use it.”¹⁸ We have treated data and other information that could be used

¹⁵ See *Comcast of Connecticut/Georgia/Massachusetts/New Hampshire/New York/North Carolina/Virginia/Vermont, LLC 2022 Standard Definition & High Definition Channels annual report*, Case No. 23A-1181, Order of 5/12/23 at 2; Case No. 18-4258-SC, Order of 2/6/19 at 2; *Entergy Docket*, Order of 3/29/02 at 2.

¹⁶ This information is submitted in response to the questions in the following categories on the registration form: registering business information, primary contact, and secondary contact.

¹⁷ This information is submitted in response to the questions in the following categories on the registration form: heating fuel overview and for each type of heating fuel: heating fuel imported, heating fuel purchased in Vermont, and heating fuel sold in Vermont.

¹⁸ 1 V.S.A. § 317(c)(9).

to provide “competitors with insight into [a business’s] finances and operations in Vermont and allow competitors to tailor their marketing efforts to target [that business’s] customers” as a confidential trade secret.¹⁹

The VFDA and VGS maintain that the volume of heating fuels purchased, sold, stored, or consumed, and the identities of the registrant’s heating fuel suppliers are information that is not otherwise publicly available; that the protection of disclosure of volume data and the identity of fuel supplies is necessary to prevent unfair business advantages in a highly competitive marketplace; and that disclosure of this information would give competitors an unfair business advantage and cause harm to registering entities. As to customer or sales information, the VFDA argues that providing this granular market-share data would allow competitors to understand a company’s scope of operations, finances, and customer relationships to target those investments and take business in a highly competitive market without the typical marketing and research investments. Similarly, the VFDA asserts that supplier information is also sensitive because it reveals the scope of business operations and allows competitors to “identify fuel sellers as potential targets for market share within a geographic area based on knowledge about their ability to meet market demand.”²⁰ While supplier lists or the identity of alternate suppliers are not typically protected as a trade secret,²¹ when supplier information is paired with price or quantity of products purchased that can constitute a trade secret.²²

In evaluating the policy considerations underlying the choice between public disclosure and confidential protection, we give weight to the Vermont Supreme Court’s reliance in *Long* on the need to foster submission of the data requested by private entities for a regulatory program to have success.²³ Whether the private entity submits the information on its own accord—for example, to offer a bid for services to the state—or as part of a mandatory registration program is not the critical factor that the Court relied on in *Long*, as the Department suggests. Instead, the analysis falls on the overarching need to receive quality and fulsome information from private

¹⁹ See e.g., *Comcast*, Case No. 23A-1181, Order of 5/12/23 at 2.

²⁰ *VFDA’s Memorandum of Law in Support of Authority to Keep Volume and Supplier Information Confidential* (1/8/24) at 4-5.

²¹ See *Panther Systems II, Ltd. v. Panther Computer Systems, Inc.*, 783 F. Supp. 53, 70 (E.D.N.Y. 1991) (“In general, the identity of suppliers is not a trade secret entitled to protection since they can be readily learned in any productive industry.”); but see, e.g., *Yeti by Molly, Ltd. v. Deckers Outdoor Corp.*, 259 F.3d 1101, 1108 (9th Cir. 2001) (“The identify of a supplier can be a trade secret.”).

²² See *Sigma Chemical Co. v. Harris*, 794 F.2d 371 (8th Cir.1986) (vendor files containing supplier’s name and price and quantity of information regarding products purchased from vendor protected as a trade secret).

²³ *Long v. City of Burlington*, 2018 VT 103, ¶ 25, 208 Vt. 418, 199 A.3d 542.

entities when it will be held by a government entity that is subject to the Public Records Act. Like an entity deciding whether to file taxes—an obligatory government program—the entity might weigh risks and benefits to disclosure of certain information. Thus, in construing the exemptions to the Public Records Act at play here, we consider the need to collect accurate and complete information from fuel dealers to carry out the statutory requirements of the Affordable Heat Act.

Reviewing the briefs and applying the existing standard for the statutory trade-secrets exemption, we conclude that VFDA and VGS have made a *prima facie* showing that the information is commercially sensitive information that should be protected, that disclosure would cause a cognizable harm sufficient to warrant confidential treatment, and that there is good cause for protecting the information.

2. Tax Return

Additionally, the Public Records Act includes an exemption for tax returns as raised by the Department. Section 317(c)(6) provides such exemption for:

A tax return and related documents, correspondence, and certain types of substantiating forms that include the same type of information as in the tax return itself filed with or maintained by the Vermont Department of Taxes or submitted by a person to any public agency in connection with agency business.

This exemption to the Public Records Act was evaluated by the Vermont Superior Court in *Bell Atlantic* in the context of a telecommunications annual report filed pursuant to 30 V.S.A. § 22: “[A tax return is an] income-tax form on which a person or entity reports income, deductions, and exemptions, and on which tax liability is calculated.”²⁴

Under the Vermont Fuel Tax, a tax is imposed on the “retail sale of heating oil, propane, kerosene, and other dyed diesel fuel delivered in Vermont” and the “retail sale of natural gas and coal.”²⁵ Fuel dealers fill out monthly a fuel tax form that includes the volumetric data for the same fuels subject to Act 18.²⁶ However, the information submitted to the Commission does not originate from the tax return; it is business accounting information necessary to issue invoices

²⁴ *Bell Atl. Mobile Sys. of Allentown, Inc. v. Vt. Dept. of Pub. Serv.*, No. 629-11-17 Wncv, 2019 WL 13061514, at *3 (Vt. Super. Jan. 03, 2019) (citing Black's Law Dictionary 1475 (7th ed. 1999)).

²⁵ 33 V.S.A. § 2503(a).

²⁶ Vermont Form FGR-615, Fuel Tax and Petroleum Distributor Licensing Fee Tax Return, available at tax.vermont.gov/sites/tax/files/documents/FGR-615.pdf.

and perform accounting operations.²⁷ “[T]he tax return exemption does not broadly extend to all information that may appear in a tax return regardless of how the agency came to possess it.”²⁸

The fuel dealer registration form is not a tax return. It is not submitted to assess a tax and is not labeled a “tax return” in the statute or by the Commission. Although the Commission will obtain tax return information to verify the data it collects on the registration form, pursuant to Section 5(a) of Act 18, this does not convert the registration form into a tax return subject to the Public Records Act exemption.²⁹ Further, the data on the registration form go beyond the information collected for fuel dealers to submit the fuel tax form.

Thus, although the issue was raised by the Department as a potential consideration, we do not conclude that the registration form constitutes a tax return and, therefore, the form does not qualify for exemption from the Public Records Act on that basis.

C. Application of Our Confidentiality Determination to Section 8124(b)(3)

Recognizing that the volumetric supplier and customer information is confidential, we then turn to the provision in Section 8124 requiring the Commission to share the registration information with the Department and ANR. Section 8124(b)(3) of Title 30 of the Vermont Statutes Annotated requires that the Commission “share complete registration information of obligated parties with” ANR and the Department on an annual basis, not later than 30 days following the annual registration deadline.³⁰ Finally, because we designate the volumetric information regarding suppliers and customers as confidential, we will require that ANR and the Department enter into a protective agreement to permit the sharing of this information under the same confidential treatment. Otherwise, the Commission may elect to provide summary

²⁷ *Cf. Bell Atl.*, 2019 WL 13061514, at *3.

²⁸ *Bell Atl.*, 2019 WL 13061514, at *3.

²⁹ Section 5(a) specifically addresses the Tax Commissioner’s obligation to share information from the fuel tax form that is otherwise confidential under 32 V.S.A. § 3102. *See* 32 V.S.A. § 3102(h) (“If any provision of Vermont law authorizes or requires the Commissioner to divulge or make known in any manner any return or return information, the person or persons receiving such return or return information . . . shall be subject to the provisions of subsection (a) of this section as if such person were the agent of the Commissioner.”); *see also* 32 V.S.A. § 3102(b)(3) (“‘Return information’ includes a person’s name, address, date of birth, Social Security or federal identification number or any other identifying number; information as to whether or not a return was filed or required to be filed; the nature, source, or amount of a person’s income, payments, receipts, deductions, exemptions, credits, assets, liabilities, net worth, tax liabilities, tax payments, deficiencies, or over-assessments; and any other data, from any source, furnished to or prepared or collected by the Department of Taxes with respect to any person.”).

³⁰ This year, the deadline for the Commission to share this information with ANR and the Department is March 1, 2024, 30 days after January 31, 2024.

information on obligated parties that is necessary to update the Vermont Greenhouse Gas Emissions Inventory and Forecast.

IV. CONCLUSION

We determine that the volumetric information and the identities of supplier and client businesses should be protected as confidential under 1 V.S.A. § 317(c)(9). We find the circumstances presented by our implementation of Section 8124 necessitate a blanket determination that the data provided will be handled confidentially, as we have done in other similar situations in the past.³¹ Although it is uncommon to deem information confidential under these circumstances, we find the briefing provided by the registrants' representatives sufficiently concrete to render our decision.

V. ORDER

IT IS HEREBY ORDERED, ADJUDGED, AND DECREED by the Public Utility Commission ("Commission") of the State of Vermont that:

1. The information supplied on the Fuel Dealer Annual Registration form in response to the questions in the following categories on the registration form will be treated as confidential: heating fuel overview and for each type of heating fuel: heating fuel imported, heating fuel purchased in Vermont, and heating fuel sold in Vermont.

2. If any individual entity's registration information provided in response to the categories identified in paragraph 1 above is sought in this or other Commission proceedings, then the participant(s) seeking to rely on that information must file a motion for confidential treatment and an accompanying protective order for approval by the Commission.

3. The confidential treatment of the registration information provided for in this Order will expire five years from the date that the information is submitted on an annual registration form.

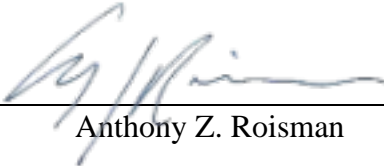
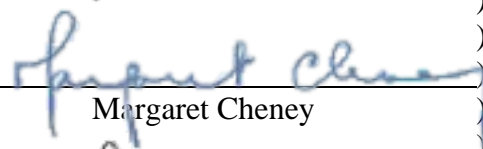
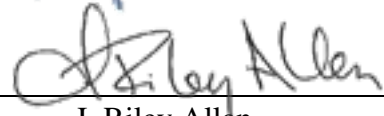
4. In any future matter, the burden of establishing that the confidential treatment of this information is warranted is on the party seeking to avoid disclosure.

5. The Vermont Department of Public Service ("Department") and the Vermont Agency of Natural Resources ("ANR") are requested to execute and submit for the Commission's approval a protective agreement to facilitate the sharing of information between the Commission

³¹ See *Comcast*, Case No. 23A-1181, Order of 5/12/23.

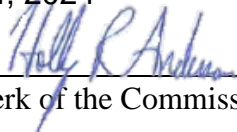
and the Department and ANR, pursuant to 30 V.S.A. § 8124(b)(3). The motion and accompanying protective agreement must be filed into this case no later than February 15, 2024.

Dated at Montpelier, Vermont, this 24th day of January, 2024.

 _____)	Anthony Z. Roisman)	PUBLIC UTILITY
_____))		
 _____))	Margaret Cheney)	COMMISSION
_____))		
 _____))	J. Riley Allen)	OF VERMONT
_____))		

OFFICE OF THE CLERK

Filed: January 24, 2024

Attest: 

Clerk of the Commission

Notice to Readers: This decision is subject to revision of technical errors. Readers are requested to notify the Clerk of the Commission (by e-mail, telephone, or in writing) of any apparent errors, in order that any necessary corrections may be made. (E-mail address: puc.clerk@vermont.gov)

PUC Case No. 23-2220-RULE - SERVICE LIST

Ashley Adams, *pro se*
544 S PROSPECT ST
Burlington, VT 05401
ashleyjaneadams@gmail.com

Ray Albrecht, P.E., *pro se*
National Biodiesel Board
rayalbrechtpe@gmail.com

Melissa Bailey
Vermont Department of Public Service
112 State Street
Montpelier, VT 05620
melissa.bailey@vermont.gov

(for Vermont
Department of Public
Service)

Isaac Bissell, *pro se*
isaacwbissell@gmail.com

Stuart Blood, *pro se*
851 Poor Farm Road
Thetford Center, VT 05075
ssblood@riseup.net

Catherine Bock, *pro se*
175 A North Prospect St.
Burlington, VT 05401
tinki.bock@gmail.com

Mary Bouchard
Vermont Gas Systems, Inc.
85 Swift Street
South Burlington, VT 05403
mbouchard@vermontgas.com

(for Vermont Gas
Systems, Inc.)

Sarah Braese
Vermont Public Power Supply Authority
PO Box 126
5195 Waterbury-Stowe Road
Waterbury Center, VT 05677
sbraese@vppsa.com

(for Vermont Public
Power Supply Authority)

Malachi T. Brennan
SRH Law PLLC
91 College Street
PO Box 545
Burlington, VT 05401
mbrennan@srhlaw.com

(for SRH Law PLLC)

Victoria J. Brown, Esq.
Vermont Electric Cooperative, Inc.
42 Wescom Road
Johnson, VT 05656
vbrown@vermontelectric.coop

(for Vermont Electric
Cooperative Inc.)

Carolyn Campion
The Valero Companies
One Valero Way
San Antonio, TX 78249
Carolyn.Campion@valero.com

(for The Valero
Companies)

Heidi Clifford
Irving Oil
Heidi.Clifford@irvingoil.com

(for Irving Oil)

William Coster
Vermont Agency of Natural Resources
1 National Life Drive
Davis 2
Montpelier, VT 05620
billy.coster@vermont.gov

(for Vermont Agency of
Natural Resources)

Matt Cota
Meadow Hill Consulting
matt@meadowhillvt.com

(for Vermont Fuel
Dealers Association)

Heather D'Arcy
Vermont Public Power Supply Authority
PO Box 126
Waterbury Center, VT 05677
hdarcy@vppsa.com

(for Vermont Public
Power Supply Authority)

Connor Daley
Vermont Public Power Supply Authority
PO Box 126
Waterbury Center, VT 05677
cdaley@vppsa.com

(for Vermont Public
Power Supply Authority)

Alex DePillis
Agency of Agriculture Food & Markets
116 State Street
Drawer 20
Montpelier, VT 05620-2901
Alex.DePillis@vermont.gov

(for Vermont Agency of
Agriculture, Food and
Markets)

Alison Despathy, *pro se*
alison.despathy@gmail.com

Joshua Diamond
Dinse
209 Battery Street
Burlington, VT 05401
jdiamond@dinse.com

(for Vermont Fuel
Dealers Association)

Joshua Diamond
Dinse
209 Battery Street
Burlington, VT 05401
jdiamond@dinse.com

(for Heating and Cooling
Contractors of Vermont)

Steve Dodge
Clean Fuels Alliance America
sdodge@cleanfuels.org

(for Clean Fuels Alliance
America)

Greg Doremus, *pro se*
gregoryhdoremus@gmail.com

William Driscoll
Associated Industries of Vermont
wdriscoll@aivt.org

(for Associated
Industries of Vermont)

James Dumont
PO Box 229
Bristol, VT 05443
dumont@gmavt.net

(for Law Office of James
A. Dumont, Esq. PC)

Laura Edling, *pro se*
81 Carrigan Drive
Burlington, VT
laura.edling@uvm.edu

Steven R Farman
Vermont Public Power Supply Authority
5195 Waterbury-Stowe rd
Waterbury Center, VT 05766
sfarman@vppsa.com

(for Vermont Public
Power Supply Authority)

Thomas T. Garden
Triland Partners LP
PO Box 777
44 Indian Rock Road
Windham, NH 03087
tgarden@trilandpartners.com

(for Triland Partners LP)

Geoffrey Gardner, *pro se*
938 Old Post Road
Bradford, VT 05033
Geoffrey323@myfairpoint.net

Joyce George, *pro se*
joyce802@gmail.com

Linda Gray, *pro se*
175 Kerwin Hill Road
Norwich, VT 05055
linda.c.gray@gmail.com

Grace Grundhauser
Green Mountain Power Corporation
163 Acorn Lane
Colchester, VT 05446
grace.grundhauser@greenmountainpower.com

(for Green Mountain
Power Corporation)

Laura Haight
Partnership for Policy Integrity
lhaight@pfpi.net

(for Partnership for
Policy Integrity)

Geoffrey Hand, Esq.
SRH Law PLLC
91 College Street
PO Box 545
Burlington, VT 05402
ghand@srhlaw.com

(for SRH Law PLLC)

David Hillman, *pro se*
Dhillman73@icloud.com

Luce Hillman, *pro se*
University of Vermont
luce.hillman@uvm.edu

Devon Johnson
Center for Resource Solutions
devon.johnson@resource-solutions.org

(for Center for Resource
Solutions)

Justin Johnson
MMR, LLC
45 Court Street
Montpelier, VT 05602
justin@mmrvt.com

(for MMR, LLC)

Ken Jones, *pro se*
Energy Action Network
kjonesvt5@gmail.com

Marcus Jones
Living Buildings, LLC
PO Box 42
North Bennington, VT 05257
marcus@livingbuildings.co

(for Living Buildings
LLC)

Michelle Keller, *pro se*
vtkeller@gmavt.net

James Kelly, *pro se*
kellyjfp@gmail.com

William "Casey" Lamont, *pro se*
City of Burlington Electric Department
clamont@burlingtonelectric.com

Michael Lazorchak
Town of Stowe Electric Department
PO Box 190
Stowe, VT 05672
mlazorchak@stoweelectric.com

(for Town of Stowe
Electric Department)

Donna J. Leban
American Institute of Architects Vermont Chapter
7 Iris Lane
South Burlington, VT 05403
lightspd@comcast.net

(for American Institute
Of Architects Vermont
Chapter)

Sam Lehr
Coalition for Renewable Natural Gas
sam.lehr@rngcoalition.com

(for Coalition for
Renewable Natural Gas)

Stephen Leslie, *pro se*
Cedar Mountain Farm and Cobb Hill Cheese
hartlandyoga@yahoo.com

Emily Levin, *pro se*
elevin@nescaum.org

John Mandeville
Central Vermont Council on Agencies on Aging
jmandeville@cvcoa.org

(for Vermont
Association of Area
Agencies on Aging)

Henry Mauck
112 State Street
Montpelier, VT 05620
henry.mauck@vermont.gov

(for Vermont
Department of Public
Service)

John L. McCormick
Louise Diamond Committee to Protect Next Generations
280 Rounds Road
Bristol, VT 05443
jmccormick@imtd.org

(for Louise Diamond
Committee to Protect
Next Generations)

Phillip Merrick, *pro se*
134 Dale Rd
Burlington, VT 05408
philsnextone@gmail.com

Elena Mihaly
Conservation Law Foundation
15 East State Street
Ste. 4
Montpelier, VT 05602
emihaly@clf.org

(for Conservation Law
Foundation)

Johanna Miller
Vermont Natural Resources Council
11 Baldwin Street
Montpelier, VT 05602
jmiller@vnrc.org

(for Vermont Natural
Resources Council)

Liz Miller
Green Mountain Power
163 Acorn Lane
Colchester, VT 05446
Liz.Miller@greenmountainpower.com

(for Green Mountain
Power Corporation)

David Mullett
AllEarth Renewables, Inc.
94 Harvest Lane, Suite 100
Williston, VT 05495
dmullett@allearthrenewables.com

(for ALLEARTH
RENEWABLES, INC.)

Jen Myers, *pro se*
Champlain Valley Office of Economic Opportunity
jmckaymyers2020@gmail.com

Ken Nolan
Vermont Public Power Supply Authority
P.O. Box 126
Waterbury Center, VT 05677
knolan@vppsa.com

(for Vermont Public
Power Supply Authority)

Frederick M Parks, *pro se*
PO Box 217
Fairfield, VT 05455
parkstrib@gmail.com

Katherine E Parks, *pro se*
PO Box 217
Fairfield, VT 05455
parkstrib@gmail.com

Jill Pfenning
Vermont Gas Systems, Inc.
85 Swift Street
South Burlington, VT 05403
jpfenning@vermontgas.com

(for Vermont Gas
Systems, Inc.)

Gregory Pierce, *pro se*
12 Farrar Street
Saint Albans, VT 05478-1540
greg.pierce7@gmail.com

James Porter, Esq.
Vermont Department of Public Service
112 State Street
Montpelier, VT 05620
james.porter@vermont.gov

(for Vermont
Department of Public
Service)

Pike Porter, *pro se*
544 S Prospect St
Burlington, VT 05401
pikeporter@gmail.com

William Allen Powell
Washington Electric Co-op
P.O. Box 8
East Montpelier, VT 05651
bill.powell@wec.coop

(for Washington Electric
Cooperative Inc.)

Jackie Pratt
Town of Stowe Electric Department
PO Box 190
Stowe, VT 05672
jpratt@stowelectric.com

(for Town of Stowe
Electric Department)

Paul J.M. Quackenbush
SRH Law PLLC
PO Box 545
91 College Street
Burlington, VT 05402-0545
pquackenbush@srhlaw.com

(for SRH Law PLLC)

Andrew N. Raubvogel, Esq.
SRH Law PLLC
91 College Street
P.O. Box 545
Burlington, VT 05402-0545
araubvogel@srhlaw.com

(for SRH Law PLLC)

Emily Roscoe
Efficiency Vermont
eroscoe@veic.org

(for Efficiency Vermont
- Vermont Energy
Investment Corporation)

Paul Rozenberg
Suburban Propane
PO Box 206
240 Route 10 West
Whippany, NJ 07981
PROzenberg@suburbanpropane.com

(for Suburban Propane)

Amanda Sachs
Rewiring America
amanda@rewiringamerica.org

(for Rewiring America)

Laura Simon, *pro se*
PO Box 1112
Wilder, VT 05088
simonlaura06@gmail.com

Annette Smith
Vermonters for a Clean Environment, Inc.
789 Baker Road
Danby, VT 05739
vce@vermontel.net

(for Vermonters for a
Clean Environment)

Sriram Srinivasan, *pro se*
slsrinivasan@gmail.com

Christopher Trombly
Vermont State Housing Authority
christopher.trombly@vsha.org

(for Vermont State
Housing Authority)

Michael C. Trunzo
Shenker Russo & Clark LLP
121 State Street
4th Floor
Albany, NY 12207
michael.trunzo@srclawoffices.com

(for Shenker Russo &
Clark LLP)

Michael C. Trunzo
Shenker Russo & Clark LLP
121 State Street
4th Floor
Albany, NY 12207
michael.trunzo@srclawoffices.com

(for Clean Fuels Alliance
America)

Jared Ulmer
Vermont Department of Health
108 Cherry St
Burlington, VT 05401
jared.ulmer@vermont.gov

(for Vermont
Department of Health)

Ryan Vazza
Global Partners LP
800 South Street, Suite 500
Waltham, MA 02453
ryan.vazza@globalp.com

(for Global Partners LP)

Floyd V. Vergara, *pro se*
Clean Fuels Alliance America
1415 L Street, Suite 460
Sacramento, CA 95814
vergara.law@gmail.com

Ben Walsh
Vermont Public Interest Research Group
bwalsh@vpirg.org

(for Vermont Public
Interest Research Group)

Michael Wang, PhD., *pro se*
Argonne National Laboratory
mwang@anl.gov

Mia Watson
Vermont Housing Finance Agency
MWatson@vhfa.org

(for Vermont Housing
Finance Agency)

Thomas Weiss, *pro se*
PO Box 512
Montpelier, VT 05601
bandsol@together.net

Victoria M. Westgate, Esq.
SRH Law PLLC
91 College Street
P.O. Box 545
Burlington, VT 05402-0545
vwestgate@srhlaw.com

(for SRH Law PLLC)

David C. Westman
Efficiency Vermont - Vermont Energy Investment Corporation
20 Winooski Falls Way
5th Floor
Winooski, VT 05404
dwestman@veic.org

(for Efficiency Vermont
- Vermont Energy
Investment Corporation)

Frederick Weston, *pro se*
formaine@comcast.net

Chase Whiting, Esq.
Conservation Law Foundation
CLF 15 East State Street, Suite 4
Montpelier, VT 05602
cwhiting@clf.org

(for Conservation Law
Foundation)

Amber Widmayer
City of Burlington Electric Department
awidmayer@burlingtonelectric.com

(for City of Burlington
Electric Department)

Geoff Wilcox
Vermont Office of Economic Opportunity
geoff.wilcox@vermont.gov

(for Vermont
Department for Children
and Families)

Patrick Wood, *pro se*
Ag Methane Advisors LLC
patrick@agmethaneadvisors.com

Brian Woods
Agency of Natural Resources-Climate Action Office
1 National Life Drive
Davis 2
Montpelier, VT 05620-3901
Brian.Woods@vermont.gov

(for Vermont Agency of
Natural Resources)

Dylan Zwicky
Leonine Public Affairs
Dylan@leoninepublicaffairs.com

(for Leonine Public
Affairs)