

Big Game Rule Change Recommendations

to the
Vermont Fish and Wildlife Board

February 19, 2025



Vermont Fish and Wildlife Department
Agency of Natural Resources
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Summary of Recommended Changes

10 App. V.S.A. § 17 – Rule governing the importation and possession of deer or elk from chronic wasting disease endemic areas and captive hunt or farm facilities

- Update carcass importation rule to include all cervids

10 App. V.S.A. § 22 – Turkey Seasons

- Adjust fall archery season dates to match deer archery season

10 App. V.S.A. § 33 – Moose Management Rule

- Establish a special opportunity season
- Extend the regular moose season

10 App. V.S.A. § 37 – Deer Management Rule

- Move youth weekend to the weekend before the regular season
- Allow antlerless permits to be used during the regular season
- Remove archery season closure during the regular season
- Allow hunters to hold two antlerless permits at a time
- Allow hunters to take a conditional second buck
- Reinstate the antler point restriction in WMU D1
- Establish eight expanded archery zones

10 App. V.S.A. § 17 – Rule governing the importation and possession of deer or elk from chronic wasting disease endemic areas and captive hunt or farm facilities

Update Carcass Importation Rule to Include All Cervids

The Department recommends updating 10 App. V.S.A. § 17 so that it applies to carcasses from all species in the family *Cervidae*. Currently, the rule only applies to “deer or elk,” which is not well defined and does not cover all chronic wasting disease-susceptible cervids. For example, species such as moose, caribou, and sika deer are susceptible to CWD, and infected carcasses could potentially be imported into Vermont under current regulations. This poses a real risk of introducing CWD to Vermont’s white-tailed deer and moose populations, which is easily addressed by updating the wording of this rule.

10 App. V.S.A. § 22 – Turkey Seasons

Adjust Fall Archery Season Dates to Coincide with the Deer Archery Season Prior to the Regular Deer Season

The Department recommends changing the dates of the Fall Archery Season for turkey so that it runs from October 1st through the Friday before the regular deer season. This would coincide with the deer archery season, prior to the regular deer season.

Currently, the Fall Archery Season runs from the first Saturday in October to the beginning of the Shotgun/Bow and Arrow/Crossbow Season, which starts 21 days prior to the regular deer season. This used to coincide with the deer archery season prior to the 2020 deer regulation changes. The proposed change would allow archery deer hunters to harvest a turkey while hunting prior to the regular deer season. Deer archery season dates are now October 1st through December 15th.

10 App. V.S.A. § 33 – Moose Management Rule

Establish a Special Opportunity Season

Pursuant to 10 V.S.A. § 4255(j), *“the Commissioner annually may issue three no-cost moose licenses to a person who has a life-threatening disease or illness and who is sponsored by a qualified charitable organization, provided that at least one of the no-cost annual moose licenses awarded each year shall be awarded to a child or young adult 21 years of age or under who has a life-threatening illness. The child or adult shall comply with all other requirements of this chapter and the rules of the Board. Under this subsection, a person may receive only one no-cost moose license in his or her lifetime.”* The Department calls these “special opportunity permits.”

In February, 2024, the Board received a petition requesting a rule change to allow special opportunity permit holders to hunt with a gun during the moose rut, which generally coincides with the moose archery season. Under current regulations, special opportunity permit holders may choose to hunt during the archery season, but they would need to use archery equipment. Many of these hunters have mobility challenges that make it difficult to get within range of a moose, even when using a gun, and may make it difficult to use archery equipment.

The Department recommends establishing a Special Opportunity Season that would run from October 1-7, concurrent with the archery season. This season would only be open to hunters with a special opportunity permit issued pursuant to 10 V.S.A. § 4255(j). Functionally, this change allows special opportunity permit holders to hunt during the archery season with a gun, while avoiding the legal complications of allowing guns to be used during an archery season.

Allowing special opportunity permit holders to hunt during the peak of the moose rut may provide a better hunting experience. It is not expected to result in a meaningful increase in the number of moose harvested by these hunters. Historically, on average, two of these three hunters have been successful each year.

Extend the Regular Moose Season

The Department recommends extending the regular moose season from six (6) days to nine (9) days. The season would continue to start on the third Saturday in October, but would end three days later than it currently does. This would add a second weekend to the season, and the last day would be a Sunday rather than a Thursday. The length and timing of the season would be the same as New Hampshire’s current moose season.

This change would help moderate the impacts of unfavorable weather on annual moose harvests. With a longer season, unfavorable conditions for a few days will have less impact on moose hunter success. This helps make success rates more consistent and harvests more predictable. It may also contribute to a better hunting experience for many hunters.

This change may also make moose hunting more accessible to hunters with limited time off to hunt. Similarly, it may allow some hunters to spend more time moose hunting. However, it is not expected to result in a significant increase in hunter success rates in most years. Most moose hunters already hunt the majority of the season. While additional hunting days may result in more

hours hunted per hunter, it could also cause hunters to be more selective about when they hunt and/or which moose they want to harvest. Experience from other states, including New Hampshire, suggests there would be little change in overall effort and success rates would be similar to historical norms in Vermont.

10 App. V.S.A. § 37 – Deer Management Rule

Move Youth Weekend

The Department recommends moving the youth weekend back to its original timing on the Saturday and Sunday one week prior to the start of the regular season.

In 2019, the Board approved moving the Youth Weekend two weeks earlier, so that it is now the Saturday and Sunday three weeks prior to the start of the regular season. This change was intended to continue to provide youth weekend hunters with the first opportunity to take deer with a gun, moving the season ahead of the new October muzzleloader season. Additionally, it was hoped that the earlier season timing would provide better weather conditions and more evening hunting time which might increase participation.

Following this change, participation in the youth weekend and harvest success have both declined. It appears that most of the declines in participation and harvest were related to the earlier season timing, which resulted in more conflicts with other fall activities like school sports. Details of these changes were provided in the report on *Changes to Deer Harvests and Hunter Participation Following the 2020 Deer Hunting Regulation Changes*.

The youth weekend is important for the recruitment and retention of youth hunters and for the collection of biological data on the deer herd. The Department believes that moving the season back to early November will help to maximize participation and harvest during this season.

Allow Antlerless Permits to Be Used During the Regular Season

The Department recommends allowing antlerless permits to be used during the regular season.

Antlerless permits may currently be used only during the October or December muzzleloader seasons. Given current fill rates on these permits, which average 14%, to achieve annual antlerless harvest objectives in some WMUs the Department must regularly allocate more permits than there are muzzleloader hunters to take them. Essentially, in some years in some WMUs it is not possible under current regulations to harvest enough antlerless deer to achieve deer population objectives.

The Department recommends allowing antlerless permits to be used during the regular season in addition to their current allowed use during the muzzleloader seasons. Permits would continue to be distributed in the same way they currently are. They would still only allow a hunter to take one antlerless deer per permit. Importantly, the Board would continue to determine the number of permits available in each WMU each year, therefore maintaining control of the number of antlerless deer harvested.

Allowing antlerless permits to be used during the regular season, in addition to the muzzleloader seasons, would likely result in increased permit fill rates due to the additional hunting days as well as the greater effectiveness of rifles relative to muzzleloaders. However, experience in other northeastern states with similar antlerless permitting structures suggests that fill rates would be unlikely to exceed 20%.

Based on the 2024 Deer Hunter Survey, approximately 37% of Vermont hunters only hunt during the regular season. These hunters do not currently have any opportunity to harvest antlerless deer. This equates to roughly 20,000 hunters, which would nearly double the pool of potential antlerless permit applicants. This change would provide a new harvest opportunity for a large number of hunters, while also allowing the Department and Board to distribute as many permits as needed to achieve annual antlerless harvest objectives in all WMUs.

The 2024 Deer Hunter Survey found that 49% of hunters support allowing antlerless permits to be used during the regular season, while 39% oppose it. Support was somewhat higher among hunters who only hunt the regular season (52%) compared to hunters who hunt multiples seasons and therefore have other opportunities to harvest antlerless deer (45%). In 2018, 32% of hunters felt antlerless harvest should be allowed during the regular season, and in 2007 only 22% supported it. The question was asked differently in 2024, so it isn't a direct comparison to earlier surveys. However, support for allowing antlerless harvest during the regular season has clearly increased over time.

Remove Archery Season Closure During the Regular Season

The Department recommends removing the closure of the archery season during the regular season, so that the season would run continuously from October 1st to December 15th.

Closure of the archery season during the regular season was intended to avoid law enforcement issues related to archery hunters taking antlerless deer during the regular season. If antlerless deer were allowed to be taken during the regular season, this closure would no longer be necessary. Removing the closure would simplify hunting regulations and provide additional antlerless harvest opportunity for some avid archery hunters.

Hunters can currently use archery equipment during the regular season. If antlerless permits are allowed to be used during the regular season, removing this closure would provide minimal additional harvest opportunity. It would allow the use of archery tags for taking antlerless deer during the regular season. Since most hunters will choose to use a firearm over archery equipment, the effect on the antlerless harvest will be minimal.

Allow Hunters to Hold Two Antlerless Permits at a Time

The Department recommends allowing hunters to hold two antlerless permits at one time, but only one per WMU. Only one permit could be acquired through the lottery.

Currently, hunters may only hold one antlerless permit at a time. After filling their permit by harvesting an antlerless deer, they may purchase another permit if unallocated permits are available. This can continue until the hunter reaches the annual bag limit.

This recommended change is intended to help achieve antlerless harvest objectives in WMUs with unallocated antlerless permits available after the lottery. Hunters would be able to purchase these unallocated permits without first having to fill their first antlerless permit. This would allow almost

any hunter who is able to hunt in a WMU with unallocated permits to make use of those available permits.

Continuing to allow only one permit to be acquired via the lottery (including via landowner priority) would ensure that permits are equitably distributed and that no hunter could acquire multiple permits unless there are unallocated permits available after the lottery. Limiting hunters to two total permits, and one permit per WMU, at a time avoids potential issues related to hunters obtaining permits they will not use.

Allow Hunters to Take a Conditional Second Buck

The Department recommends allowing hunters to take one additional buck, provided they first: 1) obtain a second buck tag, 2) harvest an antlerless deer, and 3) harvest a first buck with at least three points on one antler. Hunters would only be allowed to harvest one buck per season.

Currently, hunters may only harvest one antlered buck per year, with an exception for youth weekend and novice hunters. The selectivity created by this rule is an important part of the Department's buck age structure management strategy. However, it also results in some hunters hunting less, or not at all during certain seasons, which means they are not available to harvest antlerless deer. This recommended change would provide additional buck harvest opportunity for some hunters while maintaining the selectivity of the one buck limit and incentivizing antlerless harvest.

Based on the number of hunters who would have been eligible for this additional buck opportunity in recent years, the Department expects fewer than 100 hunters will harvest two bucks annually under this rule. The effects of hunter selectivity are difficult to predict, but this change would make some hunters more selective by incentivizing them to pass small-antlered bucks to keep this opportunity available.

By requiring the harvest of an antlerless deer before the additional buck, this change would also incentivize antlerless harvest.

Reinstate the Antler Point Restriction in WMU D1

The Department recommends reinstating the antler point restriction (APR) in WMU D1.

Changes to the Deer Management Rule in 2019 removed the APR in 11 WMUs, while keeping it in place in the remaining 10 WMUs. This was intended to allow buck age structure management to better reflect regional differences in deer abundance, hunting pressure, habitat, winter severity, and other factors that affect buck survival and harvest rates. Because of these differences, a one-size-fits-all approach was overly restrictive in some areas and ineffective in others.

Hunters have consistently expressed interest in managing for older, larger-antlered bucks. To that end, the *2020-2030 Big Game Management Plan* established a buck age structure objective of maintaining at least the percentage of mature bucks in each WMU that was observed in the 2018

population. Since accurately measuring age structure requires several years of data, a strategy for monitoring whether this goal is being achieved is to monitor the proportion of yearlings in the buck harvest. The proportion of yearlings is an indicator of the harvest rate, or the proportion of the buck population that is harvested by hunters each year. The Department determined that if the proportion of yearlings in the harvest exceeded 50%, it would indicate that the harvest rate was too high to meet buck age structure objectives.

The proportion of yearlings in the WMU D1 buck harvest has exceeded 50% every year since 2021. Additionally, the number of mature bucks (3+ years old) harvested each year during 2020-2023 was 34% lower than during 2016-2019. This was a much greater decline than observed in any other WMU, suggesting the number of mature bucks in the population in WMU D1 has declined, and buck age structure objectives are not being achieved.

Establish Expanded Archery Zones

The Department recommends establishing Expanded Archery Zones in the eight areas listed below. Maps are provided in Appendix A. Boundary descriptions are provided in the text of 10 App. V.S.A. § 37.

Changes to the Deer Management Rule in 2019 provided for the establishment of Expanded Archery Zones. However, no Expanded Archery Zones were established at that time. Within these zones, the archery season would start September 15th. From September 15-30, only antlerless deer may be harvested.

Proposed Expanded Archery Zones

- Wildlife Management Unit A
- Newport City
- Burlington Area
- Montpelier
- St. Johnsbury Area
- Rutland Area
- Bennington Area
- Brattleboro Area

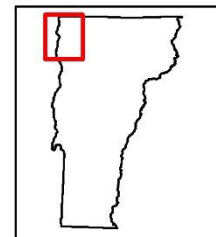
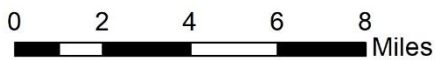
These are areas where deer are overabundant or at risk of becoming overabundant. Most are developed areas around major cities and towns where firearm hunting is limited by development or local ordinances.

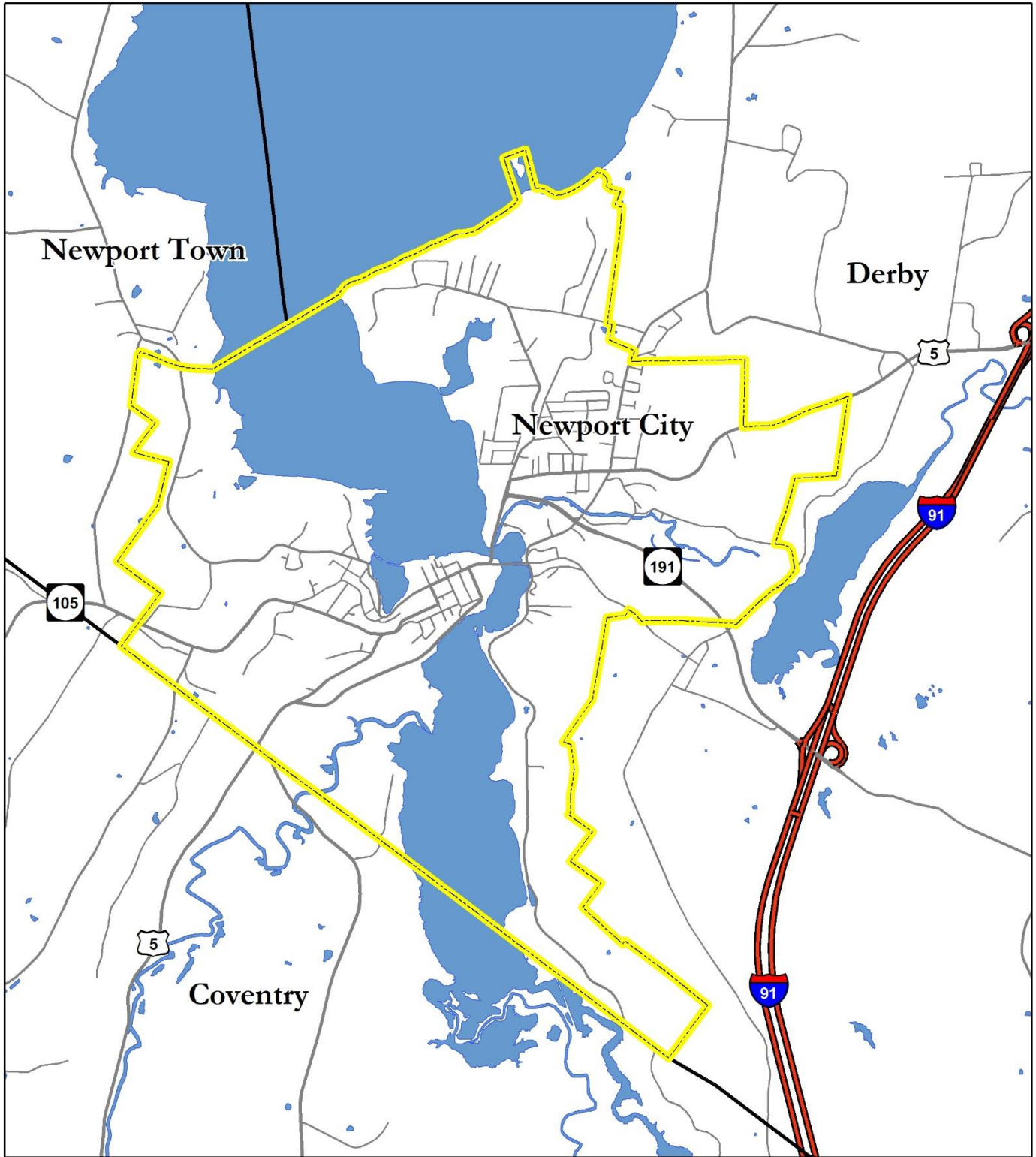
The intent of these zones is to encourage additional archery antlerless harvest, or at least concentrate existing archery antlerless harvest, in these areas. By starting the season earlier, hunters who wish to hunt at that time will be directed to these areas. Increases in the antlerless harvest in these zones as a result of this expanded opportunity are likely to be modest. However, it is one of the few tools available for increasing antlerless harvest and effectively managing deer abundance in these areas.

Appendix A: Maps of Proposed Expanded Archery Zones

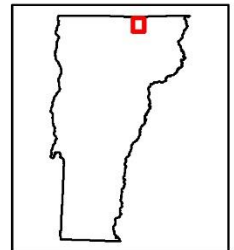
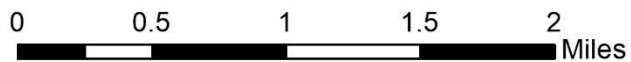


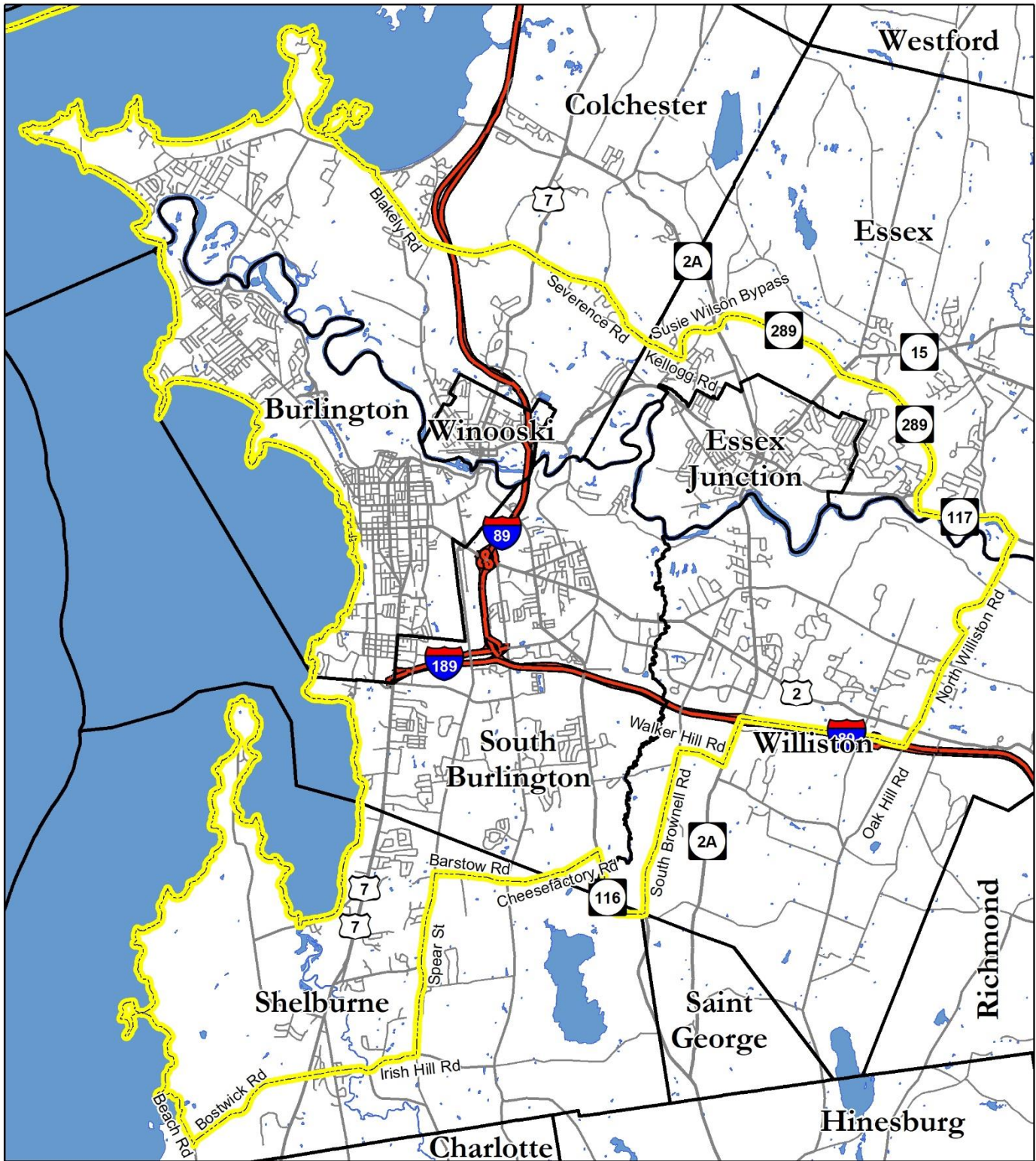
Vermont Expanded Archery Zone Wildlife Management Unit A



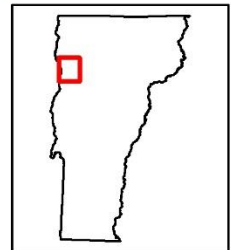
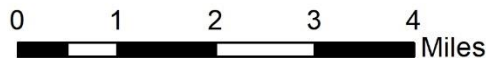


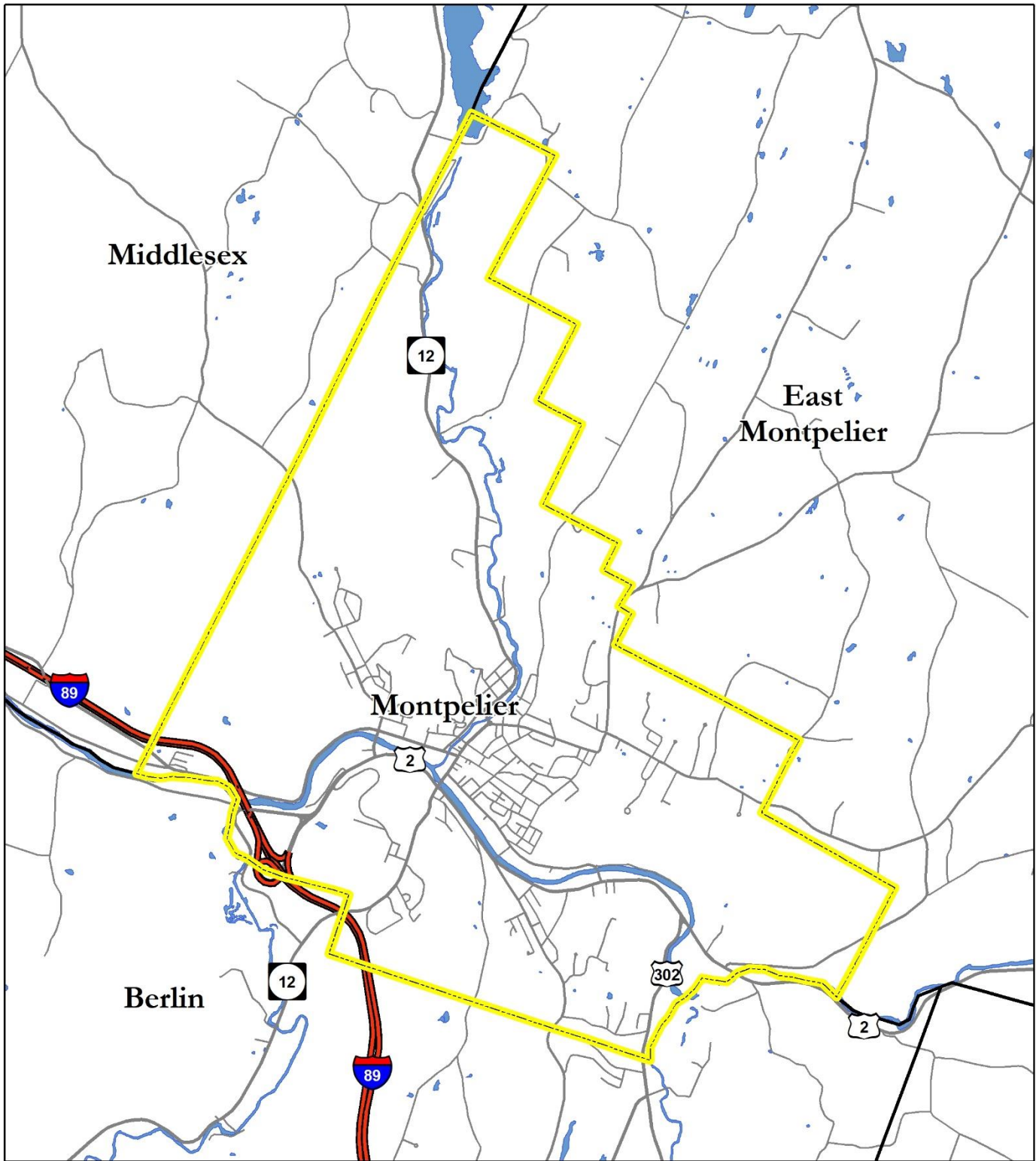
Vermont Expanded Archery Zone
Newport City



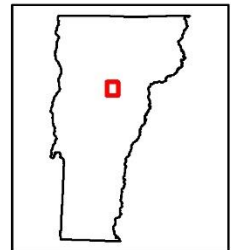
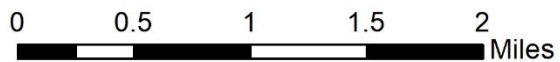


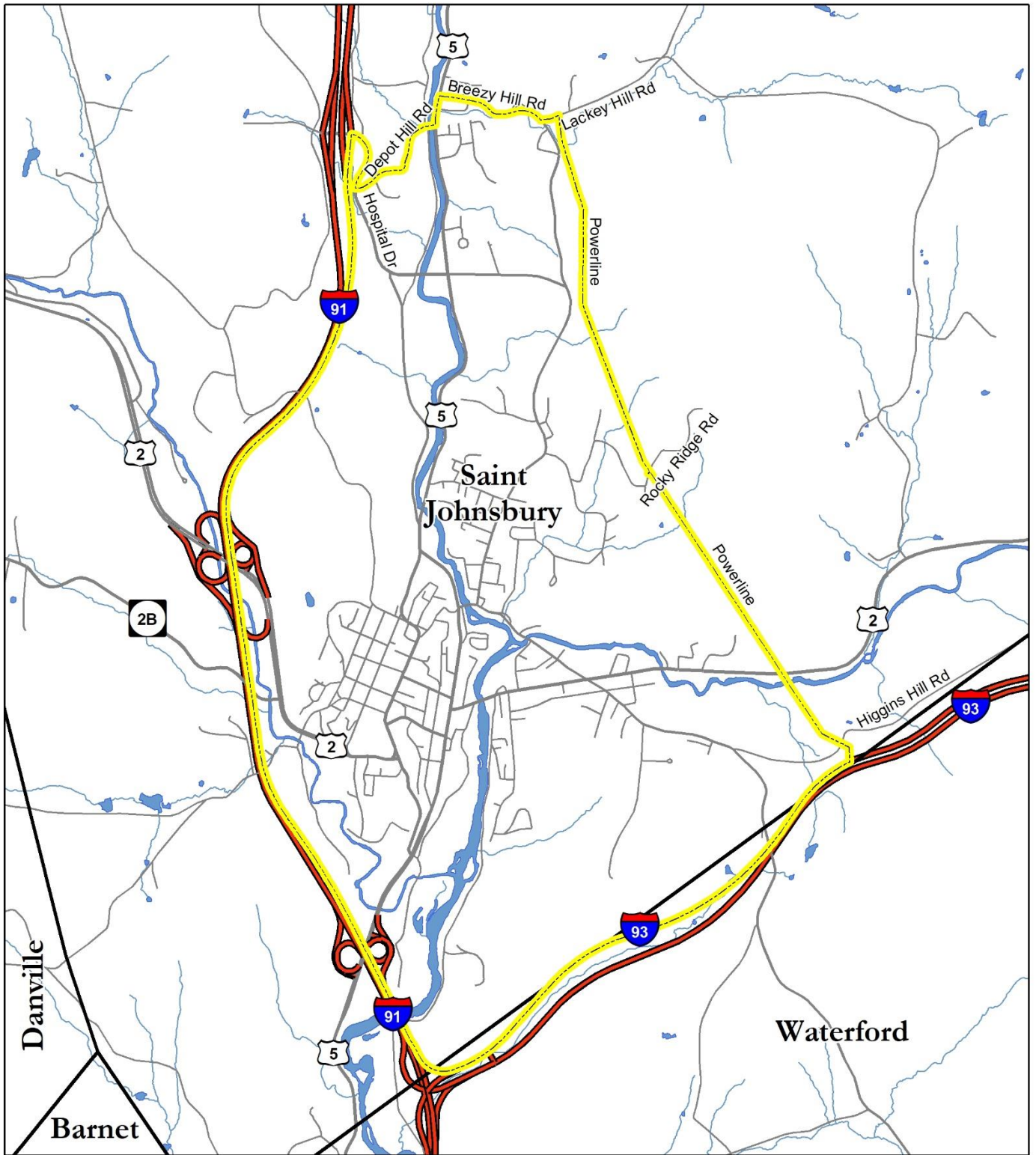
Vermont Expanded Archery Zone
 Burlington Area



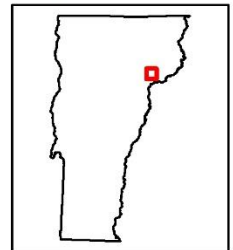
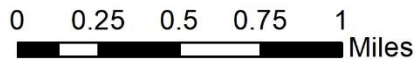


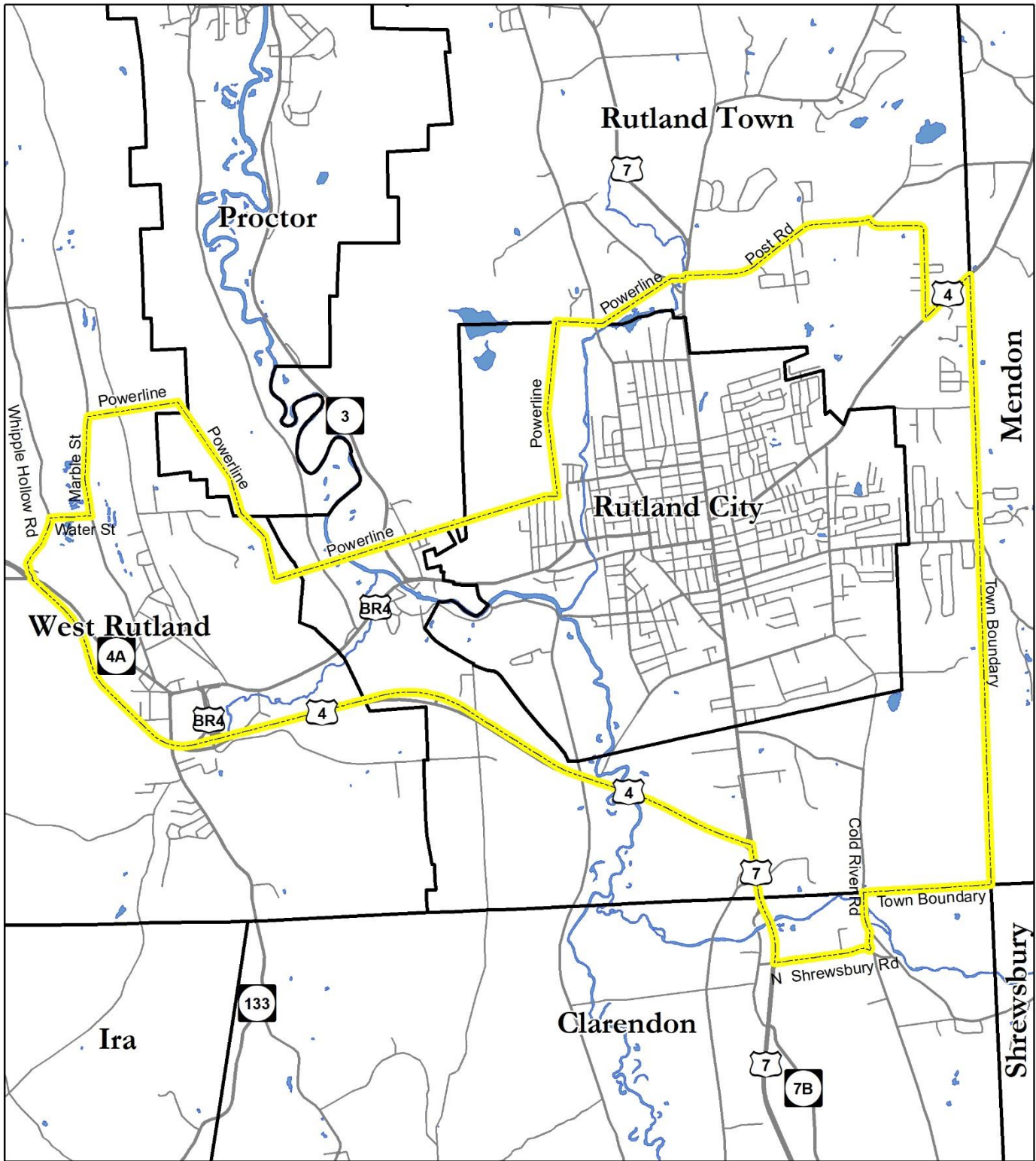
Vermont Expanded Archery Zone
Montpelier



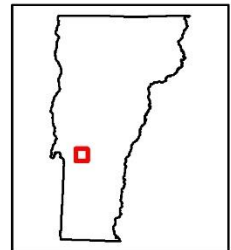
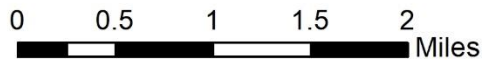


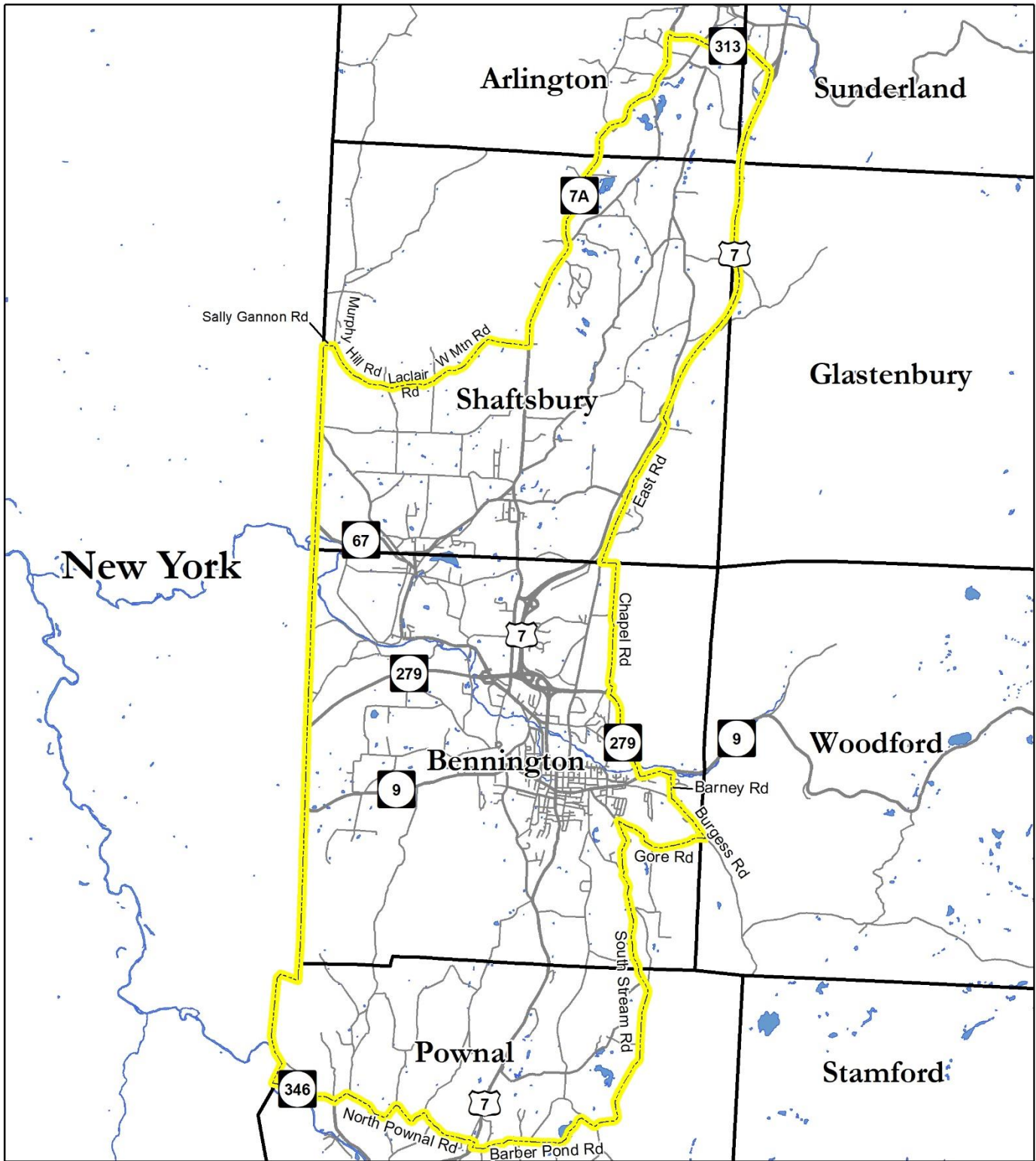
Vermont Expanded Archery Zone
 Saint Johnsbury Area



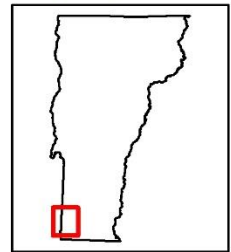
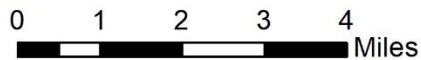


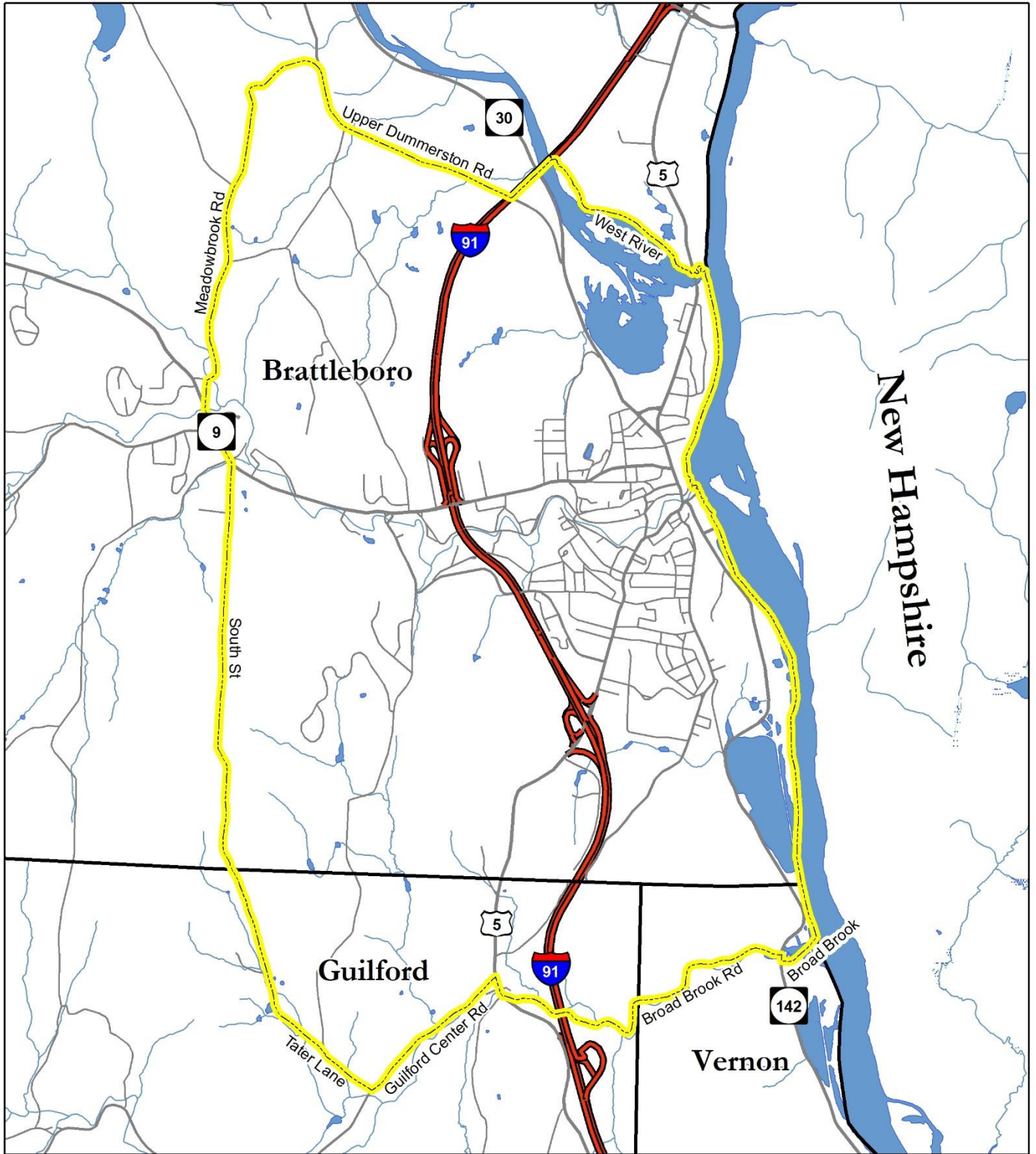
Vermont Expanded Archery Zone
Rutland Area





Vermont Expanded Archery Zone
Bennington Area





Vermont Expanded Archery Zone
Brattleboro Area

