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Thank you, Chair Durfee, for welcoming us at the statehouse today. My name is Johanna Doren, I live in Winooski, and I am the Local Food Access Coordinator with the Northeast Organic Farming Association of Vermont (NOFA-VT). Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today.

I am here to talk about the importance of SNAP and SNAP incentive programs like Crop Cash at local farms and farmers markets, and to ask for your support of these programs in a critical time. We are asking for you to

- Provide \$3 million in base funding for the Vermont Foodbank to purchase food and support community based partners
- Establish a SNAP Restaurant Meals Program in Vermont and create a plan to increase the minimum benefit level
- Provide \$2 million in base funding to support the Older Vermonters Nutrition Program
- Support NOFA-VT's request for \$478,500 in base funding for Crop Cash Plus and Farm Share.

At NOFA-VT I coordinate the Crop Cash and Farm Share Programs, which provide financial assistance to low-income Vermonters to buy fresh food from their local farmers. These statewide programs are truly a win-win. With every dollar, low-income Vermonters can purchase more healthy, fresh, local food that they could not purchase otherwise, and Vermont farmers receive a reliable, fair price for their goods.

The Crop Cash Program doubles 3SquaresVT (SNAP) benefits, dollar for dollar, for fruits and vegetables purchased at Vermont farmers markets. In 2023, thanks to a one-time legislative appropriation, we piloted the Crop Cash Plus Program, which expanded Crop Cash to all SNAP-eligible foods. This not only extended the program's impact to most farmers market agricultural products beyond just produce, it also further expanded local food purchasing power for SNAP recipients across Vermont. With the hugely popular pilot of Crop Cash Plus, this program more than tripled compared to Crop Cash in summer 2022, topping \$350,000 used across 40 farmers markets. In fact, use of the program outpaced what we thought would be 12 months of funding in just 5 months.

I have received over sixty testimonials from farmers market managers, vendors, and customers about how game-changing Crop Cash Plus was this year.

- Laini Fondiller, farmer at Lazy Lady Farm in Westfield, praised the program as "a huge benefit for myself and the folks using [it].... With Crop Cash Plus, I was turning in several hundred dollars worth of [SNAP tokens customers had used at my booth] every other week. It was so good to see the folks have so much more buying power. How thrilled I was to see so many new folks attending the market. Crop Cash Plus added an extra 20% to my weekly sales."
- Ryan Yoder from Yoder Farm in Danby shared his view on the program's long term value by stating, "Crop Cash is currently the best tool I have seen to actualize preventive healthcare."

The Crop Cash program is majority federally funded, though it requires NOFA-VT to raise local “matching” funds from other sources. As the program has grown significantly in recent years, this has become an increasingly heavy lift for NOFA-VT to secure, that philanthropy alone cannot sustainably support. State funds will allow us to 1) draw down more federal funding so that we can continue operating Crop Cash at its increased demand, and 2) offer the hugely impactful Crop Cash Plus program again, which we cannot operate without State funding.

I also coordinate the Farm Share Program, which offers a discount to Vermonters to purchase Community Supported Agriculture (or CSA) shares at over 60 participating local farms across the state. The Farm Share Program has subsidized CSA shares for limited-income Vermonters for 30 years. The 2023 summer season attracted a record 530 household applications, only 70% of which NOFA-VT was able to fund. Applications are up 260% since 2019, and we only see demand increasing. Farm Share has acted as a “lifesaver” for hundreds of families every year, while funneling tens of thousands of dollars directly into our local farmers’ pockets.

As you know, the pandemic and its many economic disruptions have altered the landscape of Vermont food security for the foreseeable future. Both Farm Share and Crop Cash stretched their seams in recent years to meet record-breaking demand and to fill gaps left by decreases in SNAP benefits and other pandemic-era food programs. Without State funding, we will be unable to sustain the current level of demand these programs experienced in 2023, leaving us with no other choice but to turn people away. Simply put, NOFA-VT’s FY25 Local Food Access budget request is necessary to maximize the federal and philanthropic dollars these programs can leverage to keep up with demand and keep people fed, while investing in Vermont farms with the same dollars. Unfortunately, this budget request was not included in the Governor’s budget. We would greatly appreciate you including this vital funding in your memo to the House Appropriations Committee, and advocating for this win-win solution. The State of Vermont can make policy choices that will ensure food security for everyone who lives here, while ensuring our farmers can profit from growing the food we all need. Crop Cash (Plus) and Farm Share are key to Vermont’s food security and a viable agricultural sector.

Thank you for your time, and I can take any questions you have.