

Testimony to House Agriculture, Food Resiliency & Forestry Committee re: FY25 Budget Request

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For the record, my name is Maddie Kempner and I'm the policy director at NOFA-VT. Thank you, Chair Durfee, for inviting us in today to discuss NOFA-VT's budget request. **We are requesting \$478,500 in base funding to strengthen Vermont farm viability and address food security by sustaining two proven programs: Crop Cash (Plus) and Farm Share.** This request is a component of the recently released Food Security Roadmap, and is an important step the legislature can take this year to keep us on the road to food security in Vermont.

I'll be sharing an overview of the programs and how they work to support food security and Vermont farmers. Then, you'll hear from Vanessa and Margaret about their experience and that of their larger communities with these programs. My colleague Johanna will close us out by sharing a bit more about the increased demand we've seen in recent years.

You may remember, the Crop Cash and Farm Share Programs 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 invested, 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 products.

Crop Cash doubles 3SquaresVT (SNAP) benefits, dollar for dollar, for fruits and vegetables purchased at Vermont farmers markets. When a SNAP customer uses their food benefits at a participating farmers market, they can get additional coupons to spend on fruits, vegetables, herbs, and plant seeds and starts at the market. This beloved program is federally funded, but a local match is required in order to draw down the federal funds. **The state funds we're requesting will allow us to expand the program to meet increased demand and draw down as many federal dollars as the state invests in Crop Cash.**

Crop Cash Plus was a 2023 pilot funded by a one-time appropriation in the FY23 state budget. It expanded Crop Cash to all SNAP-eligible foods, extending the program's impact to most agricultural products sold at farmers markets, and further expanding local food access for 3SquaresVT recipients. This program was so popular that our projected 12 months of funding was expended in just 5 months. With the appropriation we are requesting, this program can continue, and address increased demand.

Farm Share is a program that provides subsidized CSA shares for limited-income Vermonters, and has for nearly 30 years. The program has grown from serving a dozen individual families and three farms in 1995 to over 500 Vermont families and more than 60 farms in 2023.

- The Farm Share Program pays for 25-75% of the cost of the CSA share.
- The 2023 summer season attracted a record 530 household applications, only 70% of which NOFA-VT was able to fund.
- Applications for this program are up 260% since 2019.

Our requested appropriation will help to support this increased demand while ensuring farmers receive the full cost of the share.

As you'll hear, these programs are not only critical to food security, but provide meaningful sources of revenue for Vermont farmers. Farm viability is more than economics. Farmers are integral to their communities, the health of the land, and our collective food security. **By directly connecting limited income Vermonters with their local farmers, these programs actively work to strengthen community investment in both viable farms and food security.**

My name is Johanna Doren and I am the Local Food Access Coordinator with NOFA-VT. Thank you, Chair Durfee and Committee, for hearing our testimony today. As you have heard, the NOFA-VT food access programs provide more than critical food and nutrition assistance to low-income Vermonters. They also provide vital and significant income streams for local farms and connection between farmers and their community, which result in a more resilient food and farming system.

In 2019, before the pandemic, the Crop Cash and Farm Share Programs funneled \$144,630 in revenue to local farms. That number has rapidly increased, exceeding \$614,560 in 2023, as NOFA-VT responded to higher demand from Vermonters relying on the programs to afford local food. In turn, this revenue came to farms at a critical time, when many needed that income to recover from flood damage and continue to combat the challenges of climate change and inflation.

This past summer's Crop Cash Plus pilot more than doubled the number of producers at farmers markets that could receive income from a SNAP incentive program, so that non-produce vendors could also enjoy the support of this farmers market coupon. We received overwhelmingly positive feedback from non-produce vendors that 10%, and sometimes 20%, of their farmers market income came from these coupons. NOFA-VT's food access programs support our farmers and ensure they can profit from growing the food we all need and want, while increasing financial accessibility to locally produced food. This financial accessibility, in turn, means that SNAP recipients are empowered to buy local food, contributing to the local economy and supporting farmers whose values align with theirs.

Despite how much our program budgets have grown, the funds we were able to secure in 2023 fell short of meeting the demand for these programs.

- After exhausting our philanthropic options, we had to waitlist about 30% of last year's Farm Share Program applicants, translating to a shortage of about \$19,850, or over 120 households that requested our help.
- Similarly, the use of Crop Cash and Crop Cash Plus were so far beyond what we'd seen before that, even with a budget double the year prior thanks to our one-time state allocation for FY23, we had to end the program five months early.
- We estimated that we would have needed another \$237,542 to finish out the remainder of the Crop Cash season.

In fact, because demand for these programs has outpaced our funding so substantially, we hesitate to even widely market them. We know the demand would be much higher, and more farmers and eaters could benefit, if we were able to market and fund them fully.

As an increasing number of Vermonters and farmers rely on these programs, it is clear that philanthropy and our existing grant funding cannot sustain them at this rate. State funding is needed to draw down more federal funding for Crop Cash, re-start the Crop Cash Plus expansion, and maintain our increased level of support for Farm Share Program applicants.

We need \$478,500 to maintain the impact we had on low-income Vermonters and farmers in FY23. We know we'll need more to advance the Food Security Road Map in future years. Investment in these programs is an investment in achieving food security and supporting our farmers who grow our food. The State of Vermont can make policy choices that will ensure food security for everyone who lives here, and ensure our farmers can profit from growing the food we all need and want. Crop Cash and Farm Share are proven programs that are critical for reaching these realities. Please include NOFA-VT's budget request of \$478,500 in your budget memo. Thank you for your time and consideration.