

January 30, 2024

Good morning/afternoon, and thank you for hearing my testimony.

My name is Sherry Maher and I live in Athens, in Windham County.

I co-manage the Brattleboro Winter Farmers Market & have long sat on the VT Farmers Market Association Board. (VTFMA)

I am also a volunteer Meals on Wheels driver in Grafton and Athens. In that role I have seen the types of extreme need and poverty some of my neighbors live in, and I know that what I've seen is just the tip of the iceberg.

But it is from my 18 years of work with our Winter Farmers' Market and my seat on the VTFMA Board that I am here to address you for SNAP Awareness Day.

Please support:

- NOFA-VT's request of \$478,500 base funding for Crop Cash Plus and Farm Share
- Vermont Foodbank's request for base funding in the FY25 budget to purchase food and support community based partners.
- \$2 million in base funding to support the Older Vermonters Nutrition Program
- Efforts to establish a SNAP Restaurant Meals Program in Vermont and create a plan to increase the minimum benefit level

We are an indoor market started in 2006, operating weekly from November through March. Since the 2019/20 season we have seen a 150% increase in SNAP transactions at our market. Many are new customers, but many are long-time customers who are on food assistance; many are families with young children, many are seniors, and many have health challenges. They greatly value their access to more nutritious local food and the relationships they have forged with our local producers.

Over these four years SNAP dollars at our market have increased by 119%, meaning more federal funds circulating in our local economy. When combined with SNAP incentives (Crop Cash and our Boost Your Bread program turning \$10 into \$30) we have seen a total dollar increase of 408%. This translated into \$49,606 of buying power over just 20 Saturdays last season, putting more local food on families tables contributing to their health, the vitality of independent farms and small food businesses, and a stronger local economy.

While we celebrate the growth of food access at our market, it is also a potential threat should it suddenly be cut or disappear.

And that became a reality this fall as Crop Cash and CC+ was out of money as of December 1st. We informed our SNAP community and asked for their feedback. Let me share some of their responses with you:

- Not long ago my EBT benefits dropped and I needed to re-budget. I was counting on the farmers' market coupons which have varied also and now I hardly know how to manage.
- Please, please reinstate Crop Cash!! ...Inflation is causing me to run out of EBT early and the coupons have helped so much!! .
- It can take a lot of anxiety away knowing I can get healthy local food.
- As a mentally and physically disabled individual, crop cash falls only behind SSI/SSDI and EBT in supporting my wellness. It makes it financially viable as well as motivating me to go to the Farmers Market, which I otherwise could not afford. Crop cash provides me with physical nourishment and the intangible benefit of allocating these funds to my market community. I am validated by this participation, even in my hardest, darkest times it affords me access to life supporting goodness. Please, support this program.
- The Crop Cash boost to my family's EBT \$ makes an enormous difference. It means I can afford to buy local & organic for my kids, and support local farmers, which is crucial. With the Crop Cash I am much less likely to run out of grocery money each month. And it is an incentive that inspires many low income families to spend the time & gas to go to market when they otherwise would not. It has a huge impact on our community, families, children & farms alike. Please, please, please don't cut Crop Cash

And so I urge you to support the requests being put forth today on SNAP Awareness Day, and want to underscore the triple benefit of NOFA's request for Crop Cash Plus and Farm Share programs. Adequate nutritious food is critical to healthy bodies, healthy families, and healthy communities. And the more that can be local food, the more we all win. I thank you for time today, and would be happy to take any questions you have.

Sherry Maher
802-275-2835
farmersmarket@postoilssolutions.org
Brattleboro Winter Farmers' Market