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Thank you, Chair Durfee (House Ag) / Chair Starr (Senate Ag), 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).

I am here today to talk about how the reduction in SNAP allotments will affect local farmers, some programs we have already that can continue to support SNAP customers and farmers alike once the allotments reduce, and how the state legislature can continue to support these programs.

At NOFA-VT, we know that thriving organic farms and agriculturally-based communities nourish people and enhance the environment. With 72,000 Vermonters receiving SNAP benefits, there is a huge opportunity to leverage those federal funds to support the farmers right here in Vermont and get folks the freshest, most nutritious food available while supporting responsible and restorative agricultural practices.

However, the playing field is not level. Many barriers stand in the way for farmers markets and local farms in accepting SNAP that large retailers do not have – including the fact that the cost of functioning EBT machines, limited or non-existent wifi or cell service, and lack of permanent infrastructure. Furthermore, many farms are not able to offer SNAP as a payment option due to federal rules that unduly, and unintentionally, bar them from doing so, thus severely reducing the ability for lower income Vermonters to purchase food from their local farms. These structural barriers in our larger systems effectively prioritize industrial agriculture over locally produced food and build into our reliance on a food system that is damaging to the people and environment that are part of it. The solution to this imbalance is to strengthen programs that make it easier, and more affordable, for lower income Vermonters to buy from local producers.

In this vein, NOFA-VT administers some “SNAP incentive” programs called Crop Cash and Farm Stand Match. Crop Cash is a program funded through a federal grant that provides SNAP recipients with extra money to spend on produce at farmers markets. Farm Stand Match similarly provides a discount on produce at local farm stands when customers use their SNAP dollars there. These programs are truly a win-win, as they encourage and bolster the ability for low-income Vermonters to support local farms with federal dollars. The increased SNAP allotments during the Covid-19 pandemic had a significant effect on SNAP spending at farmers markets. In the 2019 market season, approximately \$86,000 in SNAP was spent at farmers markets. This number shot up to nearly \$106,000 in 2020, \$146,000 in 2021, and this current (summer 2022-winter 2023) season is slated to surpass that record. Back in 2019, through the Crop Cash program, SNAP recipients spent an additional \$55,000 at farmers markets. Again, at the height of Covid and emergency allotments, that number nearly doubled to \$92,000. And this season that number is on track to exceed \$120,000, a nearly 220% increase since before the pandemic.

Despite the clear demand for local food, the reduction in SNAP benefits at a time of heightened inflation will magnify the logistical barriers of time, transportation, and choice for lower resourced Vermonters. In turn, the reduced resources and spending power Vermonters will soon have will likely reduce income for local farmers, due to their numerous barriers to access that large corporate retailers do not have. The arc of increased SNAP spending at farmers markets from 2019 to early 2023 may severely flatten as folks are forced to make hard choices as to where they spend their SNAP dollars.

NOFA-VT also administers the Farm Share Program, which offers a discount to Vermonters to purchase Community Supported Agriculture (or CSA) shares at local farms. The summer season application opened on February 1st, and in just the first two weeks we have seen a record number of applicants, requesting more assistance than ever before. Participants have literally called this program a “life-saver” and many comment that they would not be able to afford fresh produce without it, due to reduced benefits or income in tandem with an increased cost of living; a medical condition; or rapidly changing family situations such as fleeing domestic abuse, just to name a few. Folks are strapped, and the burden left by the gaps in federal and state programs is being shouldered by nonprofits like us.

The Vermont legislature can help SNAP recipients and farmers in Vermont by supporting programs that make it easy, and even financially wise, for them to spend their benefits at local farms and markets. We thank the legislature for generously allocating one-time funding of \$200,000 for the fiscal year 2023 budget to shore up and expand our local food access programs, specifically to expand SNAP incentives at farmers markets and support the Farm Share Program. We foresee these being critical for the success of our programs this year and that the need will only increase with the reduction in SNAP benefits. We would love to come back and report on the impact of these funds later this session as these programs are implemented.

Once again, the reduction in SNAP allotments will affect local farmers, and NOFA-VT’s food access programs are working hard to fill in the gaps – but the gap left by this federal funding is too big for our local partners to fill alone. The legislature can help farmers and farmers markets in attracting SNAP recipients by supporting programs like Farm Share that meet the ever increasing needs to ensure food security. They can also support farmers by allocating \$500,000 to the Local Purchasing Incentive for schools. Additionally, legislators can join us in the Vermont Farm Bill Nutrition Coalition by signing on to recommendations we are making to our Vermont Congressional Delegation to negotiate for a strong 2023 Farm Bill in DC. That link will be shared with the committee so you can all review the recommendations and support that critical federal work to strengthen programs for farmers and consumers alike. Thank you for listening. I am happy to answer any questions.