

**Joint Senate – House Appropriations Committees
Testimony on the Working Lands Enterprise Initiative**
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Brian Lowe & Hannah Carpino
Vermont Council on Rural Development
Member, Working Lands Coalition
brian@vtrural.org
802-735-3893

Thank you for the opportunity to submit short testimony to the Joint Appropriations Committee.

Thank you for your strong, cross-partisan support of the Working Lands Enterprise Initiative over many years. That support and leadership of the Legislature has been vital to the design, creation, sustainment, and funding of work that touches farm and forest businesses across the State. Today we are writing to request that you consider converting the \$3 million in one-time funds allocated to this program into base funding for the program, given its demonstrable positive impact across our state and the vital need to invest in our economy and stronger supply chains here in Vermont.

The program is considered notable even beyond Vermont. In fact, VCRD has gotten calls from our counterparts in states like Michigan and Iowa wanting to learn more about how this program came to be in Vermont. Later this year, when Vermont hosts the 2023 meeting of the Partnership for Rural America, the Working Lands program was one of the top priorities of state rural development councils across the country to learn more about and understand better in the hope of building something similar in their home states.

The Working Lands Enterprise Initiative has become an enormously productive and valuable program that touches farm and forest enterprises in all 14 Vermont counties.

To give you a sense of impact, here are a couple statistics spanning the 10 years of 2012 - 2022:

- Funded 418 agriculture and forestry projects
- Distributed \$13.6 million in grant funds

- Leveraged \$22.5 million in matching funds

That funding invested in turn has

- Generated \$55,557,487 in additional economic activity in Vermont
- Created 539 new jobs
- Employed 1,118 people
- Impacted 24,007 acres

It indicates that the State funding of \$11 million has seen a return on investment of about 5 to 1.

Working Lands is also either the very first or one of the first programs in the State of Vermont to fall under the Results-Based Accountability framework, meaning that the data collection and outcomes are based on a rigorous and sustained effort by the team leading this work in the Agency of Ag, Food, and Markets.

Recognizing this ongoing need, the Governor increased the base funding of the Working Lands program last year to \$1 million, and the Legislature added an additional \$2 million in budget adjustment act funds.

This fiscal year, the Governor has kept the \$1 million base funding and added \$3 million in one-time funds.

The Working Lands Coalition is grateful to the Governor, his team, and the Legislature for their strong support of this program. Given the continued high demand and demonstrably high return of the program, we are asking the Joint Committee to consider converting the \$3 million in one-time funds this year to base funding – for a total base funding of this program of \$4 million annually.

Every year, the Working Lands program receives more competitive applications than it can meet with the funds allocated. In State FY22, for example, the program had \$5.3 million dollars allocated, but received \$11 million dollars in requests from 181 applicants, forcing the program to turn away highly competitive applicants.

Even though the proposed \$4 million in base funds is slightly lower than the FY22 funds awarded, a higher base funding number for this critical program

would allow Vermont farm and forest businesses and Agency of Agriculture, Food, & Markets staff alike the time needed to plan and implement larger scale projects with transformational impacts in our state.

We are extremely grateful, and these funds go to good use – strengthening local supply chains, supporting value-added production, creating new jobs, supporting rural businesses and communities, and sustaining farms and forest enterprises that are working extraordinarily hard in very difficult business circumstances.

Thank you for your consideration.