

Testimony to Senate Committee on Agriculture 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 Starr, 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. We're grateful that the House budget includes \$450,000 in one-time funding for FY25. Our request is for \$478,500 in base funding. Of course, we will use every dollar we get, but the \$478,500 number is what we need to maintain these programs at the current level of demand. We hope you'll bring your support for NOFA-VT's budget request of \$478,500 in base funding to the Senate Appropriations Committee.

If it works for the committee, 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 Ryan and Kayleigh 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 from some testimony during SNAP Awareness Day, and more recently Small Farm Action Day, that 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 about 40 Vermont farmers markets. When a SNAP customer uses their food benefits at a participating farmers market, they can get a matching dollar amount of Crop Cash coupons to spend on fruits, vegetables, herbs, and plant seeds and starts at the market. In other words, by spending \$1 of food benefits, participants can get \$2 to spend on local food. This beloved program is federally funded, but a local match is required in order to draw down the federal funds. For each \$100,000 in federal funding, NOFA-VT needs to provide \$60,000 in local match towards Crop Cash dollars. We are asking for this amount in the state budget so that we can maintain our current programmatic impact. **If we do not secure this match via state funding, we will need to reduce our drawdown of federal funding well below \$100,000, as well as dropping our capacity to administer the program.**

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. With the addition of the Crop Cash Plus pilot, by spending \$1 of food benefits, SNAP participants would have \$3 to spend on local food. This program was so popular that our projected 12 months of funding

was expended in just 5 months. **NOFA-VT's requested appropriation includes at least \$160,000 of state dollars towards the continuation of the Crop Cash Plus Program, which will not continue otherwise.**

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 allocate \$150,000 towards discounted CSA shares for low-income Vermonters. This will amplify philanthropic contributions and allow us to keep up with projected demand for 2025, funding up to 1,000 households in the year.

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 Starr 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 by a factor of nearly seven, 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 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 widely market them. We know the demand would be much higher, and more farmers and eaters could benefit, if we were able to fund and market 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 this is an important part of advancing the Food Security Road Map, now and 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. We hope you'll bring your support for NOFA-VT's budget request of \$478,500 in base funding to the Senate Appropriations Committee. Thank you for your time and consideration.