

**February 13th, 2024**

**Fiscal Year 2025 Budget Public Hearings**

**Testimony from Tom Brewton, Institutional Sales Associate at Food Connects**

Hello! My name is Tom Brewton and I work at Food Connects, a nonprofit that provides farm to school coaching services in Southern VT and distributes 100% source identified food to more than 80 schools throughout VT, NH, and Western MA. Thank you for your time today.

Please support the Governor's proposal for level funding for both the Farm to School & Early Childhood program and the Local Foods Incentive Grant (LFI), each at \$500,000.

Since the implementation of this grant, sales of VT beef have drastically increased. Prior to the LFI, it was really difficult to sell VT local proteins to public schools, primarily due to food service budgetary constraints. Now that schools have a financial incentive to source VT products, this barrier to entry has been reduced. Boyden Farm in Cambridge, VT is Food Connects' primary beef supplier. Mark Boyden is a 5th generation family farmer and cares deeply about serving public schools. He says, "The big thing is getting kids to expect local food, and they keep that when they grow up. That's more important than sales." Thanks to the LFI, Boyden Farm beef sales have significantly increased, from \$35,000 in the school year of 2021-22, to \$48,000 in the following year, and already to \$50,000 this year with still 5 months remaining.

Food Connects is one of several food hubs across the state that is driven to offer local foods to VT public schools. In fact, every School Food Authority in the state now has access to a food hub. During this school year, more than 150 VT public schools have been serviced by Vermont Farmers Food Center in Rutland, ACORN Food Hub in Middlebury, Green Mountain Farm Direct in Newport, or Food Connects in Brattleboro.

In conclusion, by supporting the Farm to School & Early Childhood program and the Local Foods Incentive Grant (LFI) each at \$500,000, you will help ensure that our children have access to a diversified range of local, nutritious foods while providing a sustainable market for our VT farmers. From our farmers to our children, the LFI is a win-win.

Thank you so much for your time.