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-Memorandum-

To: House Committee on Agriculture, Food Resiliency, and Forestry
Fr: Betsy Rosenbluth, Farm to school Director Shelburne Farms
Re: FTS Awareness Day
Da: February 8, 2024

My name is Betsy Rosenbluth and I am the Farm to School Director at Shelburne Farms, and I am here today as a member of the VT Farm to School & Early Childhood Network, with over 300 members from schools, farms, businesses, early childhood providers, parents and nonprofits across the state.

We are asking you to support the Governor's budget proposal for both the VT Farm to School & Early Childhood grant program and the Local Foods Incentive for schools with level funded, base appropriations of \$500,000 each, for Fiscal Year 2025.

I wanted to thank you for having us here today to share the impact that investing in FTS&EC is having here in Vermont on our students, our communities and our farmers. Its a win-win-win! Today you will hear directly from farmers, school nutrition directors, food hubs, teachers and students about how farm to school has made a difference. Please reach out anytime if you have further questions of any of us.

Vermont is recognized nationally for its farm to school programming that began over 20 years ago. We were the first state to establish a farm to school grant program, that is the basis for the USDA farm to school grant program, now called the Patrick Leahy FTS Grant Program. What makes Vermont's program unique is the integration of food access with local food purchasing, and agriculture and food education. We do this by combining grant funds to schools with technical assistance and professional development.

Attached is a handout that shows three levels of Farm to School opportunities and resources available to schools, from starting with awareness like Harvest of the month or an introductory workshop for a single teacher, to growing and deepening the program through the Local Foods Incentive or state grants program, to integrating FTS into school priorities and curriculum with whole school teams participating in the FTS Institute or youth directed programs like our youth summit or Jr Iron Chef VT. We provide support to schools through strong partnerships between state agencies, statewide nonprofits and regional or local organizations. When schools in a particular region of the state have lower participation rates, the partners target resources and outreach efforts to engage them. But as you know, the one constant in schools is change, and staff turnover has made sustainability more challenging.

We find that the schools that are sustaining FTS efforts have support from leadership - the Superintendent or Principal or school board, and is communicating this support to the school community. A designated FTS Coordinator within a school is also a key lever. And a cross discipline FTS team is a key component of Vermont's program that helps FTS outlast a single champion. Having an administrator, teachers and school nutrition staff, along with other school and community partners planning FTS activities leads to more realistic and sustainable programming.

The Local Foods Incentive and full funding of the grants program is another lever that provides the financial and technical support to schools. Vermont passed the local foods incentive so that more of the \$20M schools spend each year on food stays here in the VT economy and with VT farmers. Last year over \$1.2M was spent on local food by schools. And over 100 VT farms across the state now sell to schools and early childhood programs. We have a strong start but we know we need to grow local purchasing and we have been reaching out to every school nutrition director to hear more about their challenges, as we work towards changing the school food system.

With full funding of the grants program, we are doubling the number of early childhood providers and schools receiving grants. Over the last few years, 101 early childhood educators and after school programs received CSA grants to purchase and utilize local, nutritious food directly from farmers. And demand is growing!

Farm to School in Vermont integrates food access, food education and local purchasing, so that while we are providing our children critical nutrition, they are understanding what that food does for the health of their bodies and their communities, while benefiting our local farmers and building healthy habits and a connection to VT foods, for a lifetime.

We are looking for your support of level base funding for both the Local Purchasing Incentive at \$500K, and for the FTS & EC grants program at \$500K. These programs work together to support VT families, VT farmers and VT children.

Thank you