

Good morning to the members of the House Agriculture Committee and thank you so much for having me here today to speak about the Crop Cash Plus program and its impact on farmers like myself. My name is Vanessa Rose and I am the co-owner of Leaping Bear Farm. Before I get started I want to take a moment to express my heartfelt appreciation for the invaluable support provided by the Crop Cash Plus program, which was funded through a one-time state appropriation in FY23. The impact of that initiative has been truly positive for everyone involved.

I'm here today to advocate for the request of \$478,500 in base funding to strengthen Vermont farm viability and address food security by sustaining these two proven programs: Crop Cash (Plus) and Farm Share.

Farmers have a hard time getting away from their work, we only have so many hours in the day to make sure we all get fed. But I've made the trip here today to represent not only my voice but the voices of countless Vermont farmers and ranchers as well. I have spoken to so many of my colleagues and we all resoundingly support the continuation of this incredibly impactful program. From my perspective as a farmer the Crop Cash Plus program was wildly successful.

As I mentioned earlier, I am the co-owner of Leaping Bear Farm, a Certified Real Organic, pasture raised poultry operation in Putney Vermont. My incredibly hard working partner Justin and I are beginning our 6th growing season in April and we are immensely proud of the work we do. We use regenerative farming techniques that not only raise incredibly wholesome and nourishing chicken for our community, but actually sequester meaningful amounts of carbon in our soils, helping to make them more resilient to the increased flooding and droughts our changing climate is experiencing here in Vermont. This work is very hard but more so, it is meaningful and necessary.

We sell our products at 3 farmers markets, including the West River Farmers' Market in Londonderry, the Putney Farmers Market, and the Brattleboro Winter Farmers Market. This past season marked our best year ever- due in part to the Crop Cash Plus initiative which I want to tell you a little bit about.

This program has been instrumental in fostering food accessibility- enabling more people to access our Real Organic, pasture-raised chicken and eggs, as well as other high quality meat, dairy and food products from my fellow farmers and producers. This expansion has revealed an opportunity to significantly impact both SNAP/EBT users and farms like ours by allowing a larger segment of the community to engage with and access food products that were previously not eligible for purchase. Crop Cash Plus ensures more producers in Vermont can accept this payment voucher and participate in this vital food access program.

On our farm, we try hard to minimize waste, so we learned to make bone broth out of the backs and necks we produce when our chickens are parted up. We have had so much positive feedback about this bone broth, from people just telling us how often they use it to cook and how healthy it makes them feel, to customers with severe health issues that emphatically tell us they think our product is actually keeping them alive. We produce Certified Real Organic, Pasture Raised chicken products that are the highest quality poultry and eggs available on the market so it's important that foods like these remain accessible to all Vermonters regardless of income. A 2019 study conducted by researchers from [Brigham and Women's Hospital](#) linked poor diets to \$50 billion in U.S.

health care costs, showing access to clean, nutritious and high quality foods boosts the health and vitality of our communities. I feel like the saying, “farmers are healthcare providers” is very true, and ensuring community access to this kind of food is preventive health care at its finest.

The financial benefits derived from the Crop Cash Plus program have also been noticeable. It’s not cheap to produce food in the way we do it, but we believe in the benefits of regenerative farming. During the farmers market seasons, no less than 10% of our farms sales each week were directly attributed to this initiative. For some other Vermont meat producers I’ve spoken with, this has been up to 30% of their market sales for the year, a huge boost that can help an operation’s cash flow immensely. In addition, the farmers markets I vend at and participate in as a board member, experienced incredible years for attendance and sales in 2023. The true beauty of these programs are how they encourage spending at farmer’s markets. The impact of encouraging these consumer habits is so resoundingly positive, not only on sales figures but also in fostering a stronger connection between farmers and their local communities.

These programs have countless impacts. With every dollar, low-income Vermonters can purchase healthy, fresh, local food and Vermont farmers receive a reliable, fair price for their goods. State funding is necessary to maximize the federal and philanthropic dollars these programs can leverage. The State of Vermont can make policy choices that will ensure food security for everyone who lives here, while ensuring our farmers can profit from growing the food we all need. Crop Cash Plus is key to Vermont’s food security and a viable agricultural sector. Without the continuation of this program the finances of farmers and ranchers will undoubtedly suffer and so will the many connections this program has allowed between farmers and under-served communities.

Continuing the Crop Cash Plus program is not merely about financial gains, it’s about fostering a sustainable, resilient, and interconnected local food system. It’s about access to wholesome, nourishing foods that keep everyone in our community healthy and strong. And it’s about creating reliable support for the people who feed us all- farmers.

I wholeheartedly advocate for the request for \$478,500 in funding for the Crop Cash plus program to ensure support for Vermont farmers and enable our communities to access an incredible array of nourishing, local foods. Your support in this matter will undoubtedly make a profound difference in supporting Vermont agriculture and the accessibility of local food for all of our cherished customers.

Thank you so much for your attention to this and for your ongoing dedication to promoting sustainable agriculture in Vermont and for having me here to speak with you today.

Thanks!

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