

FISCAL YEAR 2024 BUDGET PUBLIC HEARINGS
Farm to School & Early Childhood

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

Introduction:

Good Morning! I'm 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 60 schools throughout VT, NH, and Western MA. Thanks for your time today.

Please support the Farm to School & Early Childhood program with a level funded base appropriation of \$500,000 for Fiscal Year 2024 as well as the Local Foods Incentive Grant at \$500,000 in base funding.

In support of this request, I'm here today to share a few stories of VT farms and producers that have benefitted from the Local Foods Incentive Grant (LFI).

Quick background, Food Connects operates a food hub that delivers 100% source-identified foods to wholesale customers throughout VT, NH, and Western MA. In my role as Institutional Sales Associate, I have the privilege of overseeing our VT public school accounts and supporting them with their purchasing. Every week, I talk with food service professionals about products Food Connects offers that meet the VT definition of local for the LFI.

Boyden Farm (Cambridge, VT):

The first producer story to share highlights Boyden Farm. Food Connects started selling Boyden Farm beef in March 2021. Located in Cambridge, VT, Boyden Farm is a 5th generation family farm that offers grass fed, grain finished beef. Farmer Mark Boyden 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."

The next school year (SY 2021-22), Food Connects sold approx. \$35,000 of Boyden Farm beef to VT public schools. Two school districts were responsible for more

than 45% of these orders: Windham Northeast Supervisory Union and Windsor Central Supervisory Union. Of the districts that reapplied for the LFI, these districts had the two highest local purchasing percentages.

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 greatly reduced. In fact, one of the easiest ways for VT public schools to increase their local purchasing percentage is by sourcing VT “center of the plate” proteins, like ground beef and beef patties.

Green Mountain Orchards (Putney, VT):

Another VT farm to highlight is Green Mountain Orchards, located in Putney, VT. Four generations of the Darrow family have farmed the hills that make up Green Mountain Orchards. This orchard was one of Food Connects’ first partner farms over a decade ago so it’s been especially rewarding to support the orchard’s increased sales as a result of the LFI. Food Connects sold approx. \$9,000 in apple sales to VT public schools in SY 2020-21 and approx. \$48,500 in apple sales the next school year (SY 2021-22), representing over 400% increased sales in just one year. 400%! And, we’ve already exceeded \$50,000 in apple sales this school year - and it's only February! . Andrea Darrow, owner of Green Mountain Orchards, is excited to sell more to VT schools, especially since Food Connects pays a fair market price compared to her other customer outlets. And, Andrea and I are already in the planning stages to deliver more Green Mountain Orchard apples to VT public schools from next years’ harvests. Our hope is that, at some point, every apple in a VT school is a VT grown apple. Providing the requested funding for the LFI will help us get there.

True North Granola (Brattleboro, VT):

While there are many more to choose from, the last producer story I’ll highlight today is of True North Granola founders Ingrid and Franklin Chrisco.

Based out of Brattleboro, VT Ingrid and Franklin are lifelong educators, and recognize the importance of healthy foods in schools. Because of the LFI, Windham Southeast Supervisory Union began purchasing their Gluten Free, No

Nuts Maple Vanilla Granola. While Food Connects only sold \$30 of True North Granola products to VT public schools in SY 2020-21, we sold more than \$7,000 in the following school year (SY 2021-22)

Closing:

I could continue to share more stories demonstrating the beneficial social and economic impacts of the LFI. From purchasing new products from our existing producer base, like Vermont Salumi bulk sausage, to onboarding new producers altogether, including Cabot, I have seen firsthand how the LFI continues to strengthen our local food economy.

By supporting the Local Foods Incentive Grant at \$500,000 in base funding, you have an opportunity to 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.