

My name is Kathleen Wanner. I'm a woodland owner, a Certified Tree Farmer in Chittenden, and serve on the Working Lands Enterprise Board and its forestry committee. I am also the Executive Director of the VT Woodlands Association and the VT Wood Manufacturers Association. I'm here this evening to speak to you about the Working Lands Enterprise Initiative and its impact on the landowners and businesses I serve in my official capacity.

The Working Lands Enterprise Initiative has been a powerful tool for rural economic development across all 14 counties. In aggregate, investments have led to 428 new full-time jobs (\$9,000/job), \$18.1 million in additional sales, \$7.4 million in matching funds, and new markets for 90% of businesses.

The forest products sector generates \$1.5 billion dollars for Vermont's economy and working lands enterprise and service provider investments have benefited businesses with direct impact on our forest resource. Several smaller producers have received enterprise grants as start-up or growth businesses, helping to secure their future. Other manufacturing members have received technical assistance to implement new marketing strategies or lean manufacturing processes. This type of technical assistance helps businesses compete in a global marketplace and protects hundreds of existing jobs. Neither grants nor services are giveaways. Each company that receives technical assistance matches dollar for dollar the cost of the services they receive. Small business matches investments with both cash and in-kind contributions.

WLEB funding also supports the Forest Viability program, managed through the VT Housing and Conservation Board. The VT Woodlands Association has been able to leverage two small grants of \$15,000 each to introduce nearly one hundred landowners to succession planning for their land through a series of workshops and provide direct assistance to a dozen families in critical need. Fragmentation is a serious issue today as is the aging landowner demographic and small investments from Forest Viability can help families keep thousands of acres intact and in the family.

The Working Lands Enterprise initiative has proven to be a highly successful economic development engine. The Governor's budget has proposed level funding for working lands. The Working Lands Coalition, representing about 15 farm and forest organizations – including VWA and VWMA, is united in its desire to see this program funded at \$1 Million for the coming year. The results of past investments speak for themselves in job creation, revenue generation, and additional leveraged funds. Since 2013, the Working Lands Enterprise Board has seen an overall improvement in the type and quality of grant requests received. Funding at the \$1million level will allow for investment in a greater number of high quality projects and ensure that technical assistance continues to be available. Program funding at \$1million also leverages the greatest return on investment from a dedicated board and administrative team.

Our farms and forests that comprise the working landscape are emblematic of what we, as Vermonters, truly cherish. The legislature has championed the Working Lands Initiative and can be so proud of the results on the ground. I urge you to consider funding the Working Lands at \$1million to help us continue supporting the many farm and forest businesses that ensure Vermont will remain the place we all love and cherish.