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TESTIMONY IN SUPPORT OF H.750
An Act to Provide Financial Support for Animal Welfare-Certified Farmers in Vermont

House Committee on Agriculture and Forestry
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Good afternoon Representative Partridge and Members of the House Committee on Agriculture and Forestry. On behalf of the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals and our almost 3,000 members and supporters in Vermont, we appreciate the opportunity to testify today in support of H.750, which would provide financial assistance for farmers in Vermont who are seeking or have achieved animal welfare certification.

Founded in 1866, the ASPCA is the oldest animal advocacy organization in the country and has one of the nation's largest animal grants programs. Since 2012, we have awarded over \$135,000 directly to 23 Vermont animal shelters and other animal welfare organizations.

In addition to protecting companion animals from suffering, the ASPCA is also working to improve the welfare of farm animals across the country. Today's consumers are increasingly interested in where their food comes from and how it is produced, and this is certainly the case when it comes to farm animal welfare. A 2016 national survey found that 77% of consumers are concerned about farm animal welfare and 74% of consumers are paying more attention to animal welfare labels than they were just five years ago. A 2015 Consumer Reports survey found that 84% of consumers view better living conditions for farm animals as either "important" or "very important." Consumers want to support farms that raise their animals in higher-welfare systems, and they're willing to pay more for products from such systems. Unfortunately, the marketplace is flooded with unverified, misleading claims on product labels, like "free-range" and "cage-free" that can deceive consumers into purchasing products from farms that do not implement the types of practices these labels typically bring to mind.

There are, however, independent animal welfare certification programs, like Animal Welfare Approved, Certified Humane, and Global Animal Partnership, that cut through these misleading labels and differentiate verifiably higher welfare products. These programs represent a spectrum of higher welfare farming, from enriched, indoor systems to fully pasture-based farms. There are a number of welfare-certified farms in Vermont right now that realize significant value-added benefits, including higher premiums and marketing potential. The administrative procedures vary between programs, but each of these certifiers requires regular on-farm audits to ensure 100 percent compliance with its standards and provides participating farms with a logo to use on their packaging, as well as marketing assistance to help communicate their higher welfare practices to consumers. As more and more shoppers are seeking assurances about how animals are raised, we've seen matching demand from restaurants, businesses and institutions.

The list of companies committed to sourcing from welfare-certified producers is long and ever-growing, including the likes of Applegate, Niman Ranch, Pete and Gerry's, Whole Foods Market, Sodexo, Panera Bread and Starbucks. In Vermont, UVM's Dining Services and Medical Center are both part of responsible sourcing programs that require a certain percentage of their food to come from welfare-certified farms. A 2014 market analysis funded by the Vermont Agency of Agriculture, Food and Markets identified participation in third-party animal welfare certification programs as a way to increase the profitability of Vermont farmers, pointing out that more and more large retail buyers are requiring it of their suppliers. Given this push for more transparent and more humane sourcing of animal products at individual, corporate and institutional levels, the introduction of H.750 is timely and would allow like-minded Vermont farmers a greater opportunity to be at the forefront of this consumer-driven movement.

Specifically, this measure would create a matching grant program to help Vermont farmers gain access to the expanding welfare-certified marketplace by helping to cover costs associated with participation in animal welfare certification programs, including on-farm improvements and certification fees. On-farm improvements are often the largest financial barrier to farms looking into welfare certification, from upgrading necessary infrastructure like buildings and fencing to installing environmental enrichments like rooting materials and perches. Such grants would go a long way to help farmers afford these necessary improvements and ultimately help more Vermont farms and businesses tap into the growing market for verifiably higher-welfare food. In doing so, H.750 would directly support and boost Vermont's rural economy by providing farmers with access to large, premium markets and increasing Vermont consumers' access to food that matches their values.

Once again, thank you for the opportunity to address the Committee today. The ASPCA looks forward to working with all of you to help continue Vermont's longtime commitment to responsible agriculture and further improve the lives of Vermont's farm animals.

Sincerely,



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