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Farm to School - Joint Hearing Testimony

February 12, 2020

Good morning-

The Vermont Agency of Agriculture, Food and Markets is proud of all of our farm to school grantees, the numerous partners who have helped move this critical work forward, and the national recognition our state receives as a result of its commitment to farm to school programming.

Since 2007, we have awarded 128 grants, totaling \$1.4 million dollars, to 176 schools and 45 early childhood centers. This has had a combined impact on nearly 52,000 students. One page 3 of this year's report, you'll find a map of all the program grantees, illustrating the wide ranging impact of these dollars. Every year we receive more requests for funds than we have available.

Grantee's are able to use funds for a variety of projects, the most common being garden supplies, local food, kitchen or cafeteria supplies, professional development, and a farm to school coordinator position.

As cultural awareness of food systems and impacts of food choices grows, farm to school programming is well-positioned to be the connector from rural economies to the cafeteria. School leadership, students, and parents all note the positive impacts of serving local foods – from increasing student engagement through hands-on learning to increasing school meal participation rates.

Early childhood education centers are the most recent addition to our farm to school program and they have joined in with enthusiasm and engagement. Early childhood centers funded by the grant program have taken a whole family, whole community approach. The more direct interaction with families has allowed for innovative expansions of services offered, such as on-site food pantries stocked with local produce, cooking classes, and parent education. Young children are also introduced to a wide variety of food, developing their palate and planting the seed of good eating habits.

Vermont has a mature and successful program because of well-organized, coordinated, and robust network of public and private organizations. The technical assistance provided by these organizations is a critical aspect of the grant program, ensuring that all schools have access to the resources and information they need to meet their goals. Technical assistance helps grantees develop holistic programs that, through coordinated efforts, address multiple goals throughout the community, the classroom and the cafeteria. Schools often report that coaching helps keep them motivated, on task, allows staff to develop meaningful connections in their region, and vital to the success of their program. Schools receive technical assistance on procurement, increasing meal participation, curriculum, and school gardens.

Farm to school continues to be relevant, particularly as rural communities are in a period of change. Supporting farm to school means supporting the state's agricultural economy, developing interest in agriculture as a career, and giving kids the opportunity to eat nutritious foods grown in Vermont. This program is a win for all who are involved. Thank you for your time and I know you'll enjoy hearing for many students today.