

Good evening and thank you for the opportunity to speak. My name is Kathleen Wanner. I'm a woodland owner and Certified Tree Farmer in Chittenden, the Director of the VT Woodlands Association and the VT Wood Works Council. I'd like to speak about the Working Lands Enterprise Initiative and its importance to the landowners and businesses I serve.

Thank you for your steadfast support of working lands through the enabling legislation in 2012 and the continued funding of the program. Thank you as well for the \$8.5M in COVID relief funding to help farm and forest enterprises that have suffered losses in the midst of the pandemic.

My purpose now is to discuss future funding for the Working Lands Enterprise Initiative for farm and forest businesses that have survived the pandemic and must redefine, reinvent, reinvigorate products and markets for a healthy post-pandemic future. I anticipate that within the next twelve months many will be ready to shift their focus from stabilization to growth. That's when they will need access to capital that helps them fund that growth.

The Working Lands Enterprise Initiative has been a powerful tool for rural economic development across all 14 counties. Prior to the pandemic, the Governor's budget had proposed level funding of Working Lands Enterprise Initiative at \$595,000 with an additional \$750,000 in one-time funds. The current budget removes the additional one-time funds. Understanding the difficult environment we are in today, the Working Lands Enterprise Coalition is united in asking that you consider funding the program for a total of \$750,000. This is not nearly what we have previously felt was needed to make transformational change but it reflects a careful and realistic consideration of what's possible in our challenging times.

This level of funding will help to ensure that farm and forest businesses keep their eye on the goal of growth and innovation, knowing there is a level of support for their matching investments in Vermont's rural economy. Those who make their living in the forest and the factory are a critical component of our economy generating \$1.5 billion across the industry. The value of this investment speaks for itself in job creation, revenue generation, and additional leveraged funds across our working landscape. Thank you for your consideration of this request.