

Northeast Organic Farming Association of Vermont

*Working to build an economically viable, ecologically sound and socially
just Vermont agricultural system since 1971*



May 11, 2020

Dear Members of the Senate Committee on Agriculture,

Thank you for your important efforts to support the Vermont farming community during this challenging time. As you well know, the COVID-19 crisis has had far reaching impacts across our agricultural sector, including on farms of all types, farm workers who provide critical labor to those farms, and an increasing number of unemployed and food insecure Vermonters.

We appreciate the committee's discussions thus far, and want to ensure that any relief efforts the committee brings forward are based first and foremost in the principles of equity and justice, and with the goal of moving Vermont towards a just, green, and thriving future on the other side of this pandemic. Relief efforts should support the long-term health and revitalization of Vermont's agricultural economy, and ensure that *all* Vermonters have access to nutritious, locally produced food. It is in that spirit that we make the following recommendations to the committee:

1) Create a Vermont Coronavirus Relief Fund to administer **direct payments to immigrant and migrant farmworkers**, and others who have been excluded from federal stimulus efforts.

Specifically, this fund should include the following provisions:

- Payments of \$1,200 to every eligible adult and \$500 to every eligible child, to achieve parity with federal Economic Impact Payments.
- Eligibility: Any Vermont resident excluded from federal Economic Impact Payments due to immigration status, including the following groups:
 - People without social security numbers
 - U.S. citizens and Legal Permanent Residents who jointly file taxes with spouses without social security numbers
 - Children of parents without social security numbers

We estimate that this program would cover 3,500 - 4,000 adults and 750 - 1,000 children, at a total cost of \$5 million.¹

2) Invest in the following programs, which **support Vermont farmers and access to nutritious food** for Vermonters in need:

- \$500,000 to support Vermonters Feeding Vermonters, which purchases food from Vermont farmers at market rates to distribute through food bank locations.
- \$75,000 to support NOFA-VT's Farm Share and Crop Cash programs, which provide subsidized CSA shares to limited income Vermonters, and "double your money" incentives for customers shopping with 3SquaresVT benefits at farmers markets.

3) Provide **financial assistance to Vermont farms of all types** suffering from lost markets, and **resilience grants** to allow them to expand and adapt. Specifically, we recommend the state allocate:

¹ These estimates come from an analysis of studies by Pew, New American Economy, and American Immigration Council. More information can be provided on request for the basis of this analysis.

<https://www.pewresearch.org/hispanic/interactives/u-s-unauthorized-immigrants-by-state/>

<https://research.newamericaneconomy.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/nae-vt-report.pdf>

https://www.americanimmigrationcouncil.org/sites/default/files/research/immigrants_in_vermont.pdf

- \$3 million for direct investments in vegetable, fruit, non-dairy livestock and diversified enterprises that enable them to upgrade health and safety measures, increase production of food to meet rising demand, and expand access to markets through new distribution channels. This could be administered through the Working Lands Enterprise Fund (WLEF), or another mechanism that allows funds to reach farmers as easily and with as little burdensome paperwork as possible.
- \$3 million to VHCB's Farm and Forest Viability program to provide additional business support services for farmers and forest-products businesses to help them adjust to rapid changes in their industries.

4) Set short and long-term **targets for local food purchasing** through schools and other state funded institutions.

- The committee, and/or the Senate's newly formed transition task force, should once again take up targets set by S. 273, which would mandate that at least 20% of all school food purchases by 2022 come from local/Vermont sources, and that 20% of food purchases for corrections facilities would come from local/Vermont sources by 2023. Working toward these targets is a key element of a long-term transition to a more resilient food system and a circular economy for the state.
- The Vermont Farm to School Network's goal is 50% from local, state, and regional (northeast) sources by 2025.

5) Create several dedicated funding streams to **support the diversification of Vermont's agriculture economy** for a more resilient future. This includes transition of dairy farms to other enterprises or new ownership. Funding needs include:

- Transition grant funding to support on-farm diversification and transition through the Working Lands Enterprise Initiative (WLEI) – estimated cost \$5.75 million.
- Substantially increase capacity for production and business planning technical assistance. Initial estimates from the Ag Strategic Plan briefs indicate a need for up to 21 full-time personnel, including 6 FTE business succession planners – estimated cost \$4 million annually.
- \$3 million for the acquisition of farmland and its transition to new or beginning farmers, which will be leveraged with \$15M of VLT's Farmland Futures Fund. This would enable VLT to offer more attractive and flexible loan terms. Funds could be used in conjunction with WLEB and VHCB in order to provide wrap-around business support services.

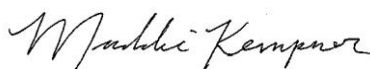
As this is a critical, complex, and long-term planning process, we recommend the committee invite representatives from each of the aforementioned organizations, as well as agricultural lenders, to provide more detailed input on the elements and funding needs for such a package.

Again, we want to thank members of the committee for your dedication to Vermont's farming community, and for your work to support a just, viable, and resilient food system.

Sincerely,



Grace Oedel
Executive Director



Maddie Kempner
Policy Director