



May 28, 2020

Greetings Members of the Senate Agriculture Committee:

Thank you again for the opportunity to speak with you today. Below please find my testimony on behalf of Rural Vermont that I offered in your committee meeting this morning. Please contact me with any questions and let us know if you would like to hear from non-dairy farmers who have been affected by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Rural Vermont is a small non-profit organization that is committed to supporting the resurgence of community-scale agriculture in Vermont through education, advocacy, and grassroots organizing. I appreciate the committee's invitation – especially during this time of rapid decision making and the limited ability to engage in advocacy under the remote working conditions.

I welcome the chance to comment on the Administration's proposal for an agricultural stimulus. Rural Vermont represents a diversified group of farmers that is *categorically disadvantaged* in the Administration's proposal. We all witness the desperate need for relief in the dairy industry, and Rural Vermont expressly welcomes the Administration's and also the committee's considerations in this regard. But we also believe that the Administration's proposal creates inequity among farmers and is unjust for those farms that are confronted with this categorical disadvantage.

What do I mean by this? We understand that the VAAFM referenced, in their testimony on 5/27, the availability of ACCD programs for non-dairy farmers. That throws these farmers into one funding pool with all other small businesses and non-profit organizations in the state – higher competition for less money. That is not a streamlined and easy program for all farmers.

- *The Administration's proposal includes two programs under the Agency of Commerce and Community Development. There are \$20 Million for a Restart Vermont Loan and Grant Program and another \$5 Million for a Restart Vermont Technical Support Network Program in comparison to the \$40 Million that is being made available in the proposed dairy assistance program. Farms with more than five employees are not eligible for the Restart Vermont Loan and Grant program.*
- *The Agency of Agriculture also referenced the WLEB programs. There is a total of \$180,000 in funds with an application period of six days — we received the VAAFM email on this only on May 25th and the application period ends on May 31st. This short application period is inadequate for farmers.*

This is a total of less than \$26 Million in comparison to the suggested \$40 million for dairy farms, but with a very different level of competition. Non-dairy farms would have to come to terms with an unfamiliar agency (the

ACCD as opposed to AAFM) and navigate by themselves which programs apply to them. This time of the season is the worst time of the year for farmers to figure out unfamiliar agencies, new contact persons, and a jungle of options. We support the committee's intention to develop an agricultural relief program that is easy and streamlined for all farmers.

For Rural Vermont, an equitable program would be open to any farmer who can demonstrate the required losses and expenses related to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Rural Vermont is interested in learning more about the agency's justification of the categorical disadvantage that diversified farmers face in demonstrating economic hardship in losses and expenses that occurred in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic. Such a disadvantage should only be justified on a sturdy factual case-by-case basis. That would also reflect the committee's intent to seek equitable solutions and to acknowledge the cultural shift in agricultural practices in the state. I hope your committee follows through with your consideration of supporting non-dairy farmers and linking stimulus funds with incentives for a long-term vision for agriculture in Vermont. Wouldn't it then be easier for everyone involved to have one agricultural relief program for any farmer that demonstrates extraordinary expenses as well as losses?

The state is facing food insecurity — I'm sure legislators hear directly from constituents about the enormous lines for charitable food distribution.

Your committee has discussed the need for a resilient food system. Many of the farms disadvantaged by the Administration's proposal work tirelessly towards resilience, are producing food for the people in Vermont, especially during this pandemic. They also deserve support as needed from their Agency of Agriculture, Food, and Markets.

Rural Vermont will encourage diversified non-dairy producers to speak up about their struggles to shift production plans, distribution systems, and supply chains. Undeniably non-dairy producers have also suffered from the loss of markets, such as schools and restaurants. Rural Vermont would like the committee to hear from diversified farmers on the Administration's proposal directly and is willing to organize testimonials, especially since the committee will be hearing testimony from farmers in the dairy sector on May 29, 2020.

Sincerely,

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