

February 3, 2021 10:45 AM VT Everyone Eats testimony to House Agriculture and Forestry Committee
Abbey Willard, Director of Agricultural Development Division, Agency of Agriculture, Food and Markets

1. I sit on VEE task force representing AAFM
Great perspectives to hear from today – from the state and regional partners, community hubs, restaurants, and farmers.
2. The VT Everyone Eats program has been a meaningful impact for participating farms, food businesses, and many communities
 - programming has been delivered in all 14 counties, serving a diversity of stakeholders including over 100 restaurants, 170 farms, and hundreds of thousands of meals serving Vermonters including seniors, unhoused, newly food insecure, childcare centers, worker development programs, health clinics
3. You will hear more from those that have been instrumental in the development and implementation of this program since August 2020
 - Kara from Evening Song Farm can speak to their farm’s specific experience, but in general
 - Value of farmers participating in this community development and feeding program is
 - o feels good to contribute to your community; feels good to help those in need; feels good to feed people
 - Especially during times of transition, uncertainty and community disruption
 - o Restaurants are an important market channel that was severely impacted and many revenues losses were experienced when restaurants originally closed in response to the pandemic and state of emergency in VT
 - A bit of context around the impact of this pandemic on the ag community
4. Through various ag farm and food business surveys released by AAFM and UVM research team led by Meredith Niles conducted early on in the pandemic and again this past summer, the ag community communicated economic hardship
 - 60% of respondents indicated that COVID-19 was the most significant business challenge they ever experienced
 - most common market impacts included a change in demand, change in market channels, or closure of markets
 - 44% of ag businesses saw loss in sales
 - The greatest decrease in market outlets (as a percent of businesses participating) among respondents was international (60% decrease), restaurants (52% decrease), and farmers’ markets (38% decrease in use).
 - 2/3 of businesses made either a significant or moderate business change; primarily around how they sold their products, how product was distributed, and additional safety measures on farm and with customers
 - And they intend to continue these changes for the next 1-2 years
 - While 96% of respondents agreed it was necessary to change their business as a response to COVID-19, more than 40% of respondents did not see opportunity for changes in the future, were not excited about the changes, and did not believe their business had the appropriate labor, finances or equipment to implement changes.

5. Support to our ag community and businesses at this time is so critical
 - VCAAP program for dairy and ag and working lands businesses requested over \$68M in need, AAFM was able to award \$25 million – responding to approximately 37% of the revenue loss demand
 - food insecurity within the agricultural community as well
 - o The majority of respondents indicated they had just enough or not enough money to make ends meet at the end of each month.
 - o 20% of respondents (1 in 5) were identified as at risk of food insecurity compared to 8.5% before COVID-19, representing a 138% increase in risk due to the pandemic
 - o and this from a population that grows food but still is having to make difficult choices based on limited resources
 - Demonstrates need for an ongoing economic recovery/economic development program for our farms and our communities
 - o anticipate a need to continue this effort beyond June 2021