

February 9, 2022 Testimony to the Appropriations Committee

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Chair Kitchel, Chair Hooper, Members of the Appropriations Committees, thank you for the opportunity to speak to you today on the FY23 Governor's Recommended Budget.

And, thank you for your support in both the creation and the sustainment of the Working Lands Enterprise Initiative. This has become an enormously productive program that touches farm and forest enterprises in all 14 Vermont counties. Through 2020, the program has created more than 500 jobs and generated more than \$36 million in new economic activity – meaning that for every dollar invested, the State has seen a return in excess of 5 to 1.

I also want to thank the Governor and his team who have increased the base funding for Working Lands to \$1 million annually.

Given what the program has demonstrated over the past several years, the Vermont Council on Rural Development and the broader Working Lands Coalition we represent believe there is a significant opportunity for a one-time allocation of \$15 million, to be spent over three years on transformative projects for farm and forest enterprises.

Here are the three points crucial points I hope to leave you with:

- **First, even with tremendous action by the legislature to significantly increase the Working Lands allocation each of the last two years, there has still been significant unmet need:**
 - In FY21, Working Lands was awarded an additional \$3.5 million to address total demand of about \$6.8 million.
 - In the state FY22, these committees just took action to allocate an additional \$2.1 million as part of the Budget Adjustment Act to a funding allocation that already exceeded \$5 million.
 - A \$1 million allocation will not meet viable need in the next fiscal year.

- **Second, this is a proven, practical program and a powerful economic development tool.**

- More than 250 farm and forest enterprises have been impacted all across the state, leading to more jobs, a stronger supply chain, the creation of production infrastructure locally, and Vermont companies better able to access new markets and create value-added products in state.
- **Lastly, this program has significant, long-term value to the State.**
 - As we come out of a pandemic that has underscored the value of a sustainable food system and underscored supply chain risks, significant investments in our farm and forest enterprises will be money well spent.

Thank you for your time.