

## House Committee on Agriculture and Forestry

Testimony from Jen Daniels, Co-Founder/President, Meristem Farms

Good Morning!

- Thank-you for this opportunity to speak with you today.
- It's great to see both the House and Senate's Cmtes here today along with my fellow farmers and advocates.
- For the record - My name is Jen Daniels, I reside in Colchester and I am President and Co-founder of Meristem Farms. Having farmed hemp commercially for three years in the NEK and in Shelburne
- Before I became a hemp farmer and business owner in VT I worked for over 20 years in public service in community development, race relations, and as a landscape architect designing public spaces to promote social equity.
- From that experience I learned that one of the most important factors in supporting social equity—probably THE most important—is meaningful economic opportunity.
  - Not just so people can get by, but to have a real CHANCE to create abundance and build inter-generational wealth.
  - I've seen it in my work with Native American communities in the Southwest and indigenous communities abroad, I've seen it in my work with Black and Brown neighborhoods in Connecticut and Washington DC,
  - I'm seeing it all too clearly here in Vermont.
  - As land skyrockets in value and transfers out of productive use, the problem is only getting worse.

- The launch of Vermont’s new cannabis market is a historic moment for developing that kind of meaningful economic opportunity, especially in outdoor cultivation where those who lack access to large amounts of capital have a real shot at creating that abundance and building inter-generational wealth, and at the same time preserve working lands.
- But that opportunity will be lost if the barriers to access are not removed:
- I WILL SHARE TWO SOLUTIONS TO THOSE BARRIERS TODAY...
- FIRST, All outdoor cultivation must be considered “farming” under state law and thus not restricted by Act 250 and local zoning. Such restrictions have been used all too often to restrict access and as a tool of racial discrimination.
  - And it’s not enough to do that only for small cultivators. The small-cultivation tiers are not a means to build abundance and inter-generational wealth, particularly outdoors.
  - The environmental and zoning impact of outdoor cannabis farming is no different from hemp, which is considered farming at any scale in Vermont. And, the impacts really aren’t much different from any other type of farming either.
- AS A SECOND SOLUTION TO THOSE BARRIERS
- The State needs to support Community Land Trusts and other alternative models to land ownership and land access\*.
- As land values skyrocket, this is becoming increasingly necessary to ensure access to those without large amounts of capital—not just in cannabis but in all agriculture.
- 4 years ago I left public service and moved to Vermont to start a hemp farming business, because of Vermont’s working-land ethic and the

economic opportunity this presented for my husband, our three teenage kids and me.

- We have privilege because we are white, and had some access to modest capital to get started.
- States all over the country are struggling to get ‘social equity’ *right in* cannabis but because of Vermont’s commitment to working lands, economic opportunity AND racial and social justice we have a golden opportunity RIGHT NOW to become a model for the nation in how this CAN work.

\*Land trust and equity models:

- [Agrarian Trust](#)
- [Queer farmer collectives](#)
- [Northeast Farmers of Color Land Trust](#)
- [SUSU Healing Collective](#)
- [Cooperation Jackson](#)
- [Abenaki Land Link Project](#)
- [The “Every Town” Project](#)
- [Champlain Housing shared equity program](#)