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February 11, 2021

To Members of House and Senate Committees  
on Agriculture

Dear Legislators and Senators,

Vermont is an average income state with high housing costs. In rural areas, this is amplified by lower-than-average farm-work incomes and hard to find adequate and affordable housing. This creates a challenge for farm employers to recruit and retain employees and limits the growth of our state's farm economy.

Champlain Orchards employs 45 year-round employees, 10 seasonal US employees, and 55 seasonal H2A employees. We could not operate successfully without our seasonal H2A employees; many have been working at the orchard for decades and have become part of the fabric of the broader community. Champlain Orchards is required to provide them with housing that is inspected and certified to meet rigid health and safety guidelines. Resources to assist us as an employer to develop affordable temporary housing would be most useful. When Champlain Orchards recruits a year-round employee that needs to relocate to the area, the issue of affordable housing becomes a hurdle that sometimes is a deal-breaker for employment. Resources to help source permanent housing or develop on-farm housing for year-round employees would be greatly valued.

As a farm-employer we are advocating for the creation of a single entity to represent farmers and farmworkers in the interest of increasing the availability of adequate and affordable housing in the state of Vermont. Currently Vermont has several groups addressing the issue of affordable, rural housing (ie USDA, VHCB, REDI, Pathstone, Neighborworks) each on their own and each with a little bit different focus. More may be accomplished in this area if there is a concerted, focused effort by a coalition or a collaborative joint venture of all interested parties. For employers, a "one-stop advocate" to provide information and resources on the development of housing for farmworkers on-the-farm or off-the-farm would be welcomed and extremely useful.

The development of affordable, rural housing will support a strong agricultural workforce, that is critical to the development of a robust farm economy in the state of Vermont. Champlain Orchards would welcome the opportunity to be part of the planning for and be a participant in such a venture.

Sincerely,

Mary R. Mitiguy  
Human Resource Manager