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To: Senate Agriculture Committee

Fr: Betsy Rosenbluth, Project Director of VT FEED, Shelburne Farms

Da: January 12, 2022

Re: Food Security Initiatives and Requests 2022

My name is Betsy Rosenbluth and I am the Project Director of VT FEED, a partnership of Shelburne Farms and NOFA-VT. I also coordinate the VT Farm to School and Early Childhood Network. Thank you for your support and good work last session, to do what we can to support VT families so no child goes to bed hungry or is distracted at school by hunger. **Every Vermonter should have access to the nourishing food we produce in this state, so that while we address food insecurity we are also helping our VT farmers and agricultural economy.** That is the win-win your Committee understands so well.

So towards this goal of improving food security while expanding markets for VT producers, we know we can make a difference this year by:

- ensuring families do not lose universal school meals after this school year, by passing the universal school meals bill (S.100) - with both breakfast and lunch included;
- investing in the Local Purchasing Incentive that passed last session with one time funding to get it started - we need ongoing funding and estimate that it will cost about \$500k for FY2023
- fully funding the FTS & EC grants program at \$500k base funding that is seeing greater demand than ever; and
- supporting the VT Foodbank to continue their pandemic response in the face of rising food insecurity in our state.

I have submitted a one page summary of these requests and their status and my colleagues and I are here to share more details with you. Food insecurity is 27% higher now than before the pandemic in 2019. These programs all work together to help support VT families, VT farmers and VT children as we recover from the pandemic.

The Local Food Incentive grant received one time funding last year of \$500,000 and we are asking for base funding of \$500,000 for FY 23. As many products became harder for school nutrition Directors to find, local foods this year remained available to source such as Vermont beef, maple syrup, and local dairy. Over 100 Vermont farms now provide food to feed our youth across the state through early childhood programs and school nutrition programs.

VT FEED has reached out to every supervisory union in the state to spread awareness of the Local Foods Incentive grant opportunity and to provide technical assistance. Applications for that program are due this Friday, January 15th. Our outreach has included identifying key school nutrition and business office personnel at every supervisory union, sharing resources for the grant that have been created and available on the Vermont FEED website, scheduling TA sessions and answering on-going questions. Our Technical assistance has ranged from support towards completing the Agency of Education application, tracking local foods, developing local food plans, identifying ways to increase local purchasing and connecting with producers, and procurement support. Feedback has been extremely positive. SUs want and need this grant to be able to increase their local purchasing. Every school nutrition professional we've talked to wants to be feeding their kids more local foods and the reason we hear they can't or haven't is always *budgetary reasons*. **Providing SUs this grant opportunity is essential for getting more local food in the mouths of VT kids and directing more dollars to VT farmers.**

This grant has also provided an opportunity for school nutrition staff across a district to convene and better strategize their local purchasing plans. For supervisory unions where schools have traditionally been working in their own silo, the incentive has spurred relationship building and cross collaboration to reach their local purchasing goals.

There is a clear and ongoing need for technical assistance and the development and maintenance of various tools and resources to ensure the success of the program, such as a pre-verified product list from key distributors or support with using the tracking tool. So far, VT FEED has played this role without support from the State, scrambling to fund the staff time through private fundraising - but this is not sustainable, especially next year when we anticipate even more demand for TA. So that is where the FTS & EC grants come in, an increase in the grants program can cover the increased demand for TA.

You will hear from Trevor today how we are seeing growing demand for the FTS & EC grants. We have had a record number of applicants, including Early Childhood providers. The VAAFMM has been really flexible in meeting this demand, such as offering subsidized CSA shares to childcare providers, in addition to the other grants. Our goal is to expand nutrition services for these youngest Vermonters, and connect them to agriculture and healthy foods especially at an age where their tastes are developing and their parents and caregivers are so involved. We also have seen a steady interest from k-12 schools even during this stressful time.

We are asking you to please support the Farm to School & Early Childhood program with a base appropriation of \$500,000 for Fiscal Year 2023. The funding would support the expanded local purchasing TA, support more schools and early childhood programs and update and expand Vermont's Harvest of the Month program - an excellent entry point for many schools.

This is the year to build more resiliency in our local food systems, ensure our youth are well nourished, and expand opportunities for our farmers.