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Good morning and thank you for this opportunity to speak to you about my experience with the Soil Health and Payment for Ecosystem Services and Working Group.

My name is Cat Buxton. I live and farm in Sharon, Vermont. I have co-convened the Vermont Healthy Soils Coalition since 2015. Vermont Healthy Soils Coalition is a coalition representing grassroots activists and enthusiasts, farmers, foresters, organizations and businesses that work with or for the land, water and climate. Our shared vision is to build the social mycelium to shift the paradigm of how people interface with the land and one another, to a paradigm that promotes community resilience, improves the quality of our food and our health, and protects our soil and water from erosion, flooding and droughts.

When, in 2019, a coalition of farmer watershed groups initially presented to the legislature their idea of hiring farmers to help Vermont meet its ecosystem repair needs, I was excited to help create conditions for farmer voices to continue leading that process. VHSC was honored to be granted a seat on the PES Working Group which I split with my colleague, Didi Pershouse. Our primary role in the working group was to continue to uplift farmer voices that represent small-scale, diversified agriculture. As a part of that work, we convened a Small Farm Cohort that met monthly or more for the entire 3-year working group process. The Small Farm Cohort works in collaboration with Rural Vermont and NOFA-VT and draws from the shared wisdom of dozens of small farms, service providers and advocates to inform our process. This group of farmers continues to meet twice monthly to follow our work through to fruition. We want to see changes made that actually benefit farmers and land managers who are doing the work every day to help create conditions for healthy ecosystem function that all of society benefits from.

This group convened two surveys of farmers throughout the state to discover what people thought payment for ecosystem services meant and how/if farmers would like to be involved or compensated if such a program was to be created. We advocated for the Working Group to conduct a survey of farmers, farmer interviews, and to include and compare the results from our Small Farm Cohort efforts. We also advocated for a transparent and accessible public process to include opportunities for the public to weigh in on the discussion. While a survey was conducted by the technical team hired by the Working Group, the results did not carry the weight they should have. For example, the acceptable payment rate that farmers expressed in the survey was essentially ignored. In the last months of the Working Group process, the strong consensus that farmers do not want another program with separate paperwork, monitoring and reporting was finally heard. Three members of our Small Farm Cohort presented to the Working Group, including introducing the Conservation Stewardship

Program – Plus (CSP+) proposal that ultimately became the framework for the final Working Group recommendations.

Two very critical things I have learned through this process over the past 3 years are that any proposals that will affect farmers must include and indeed be led by farmer voices. These land managers are the ones who know what is possible on the land they care for. The second is that while farmers need to be paid for their good work including the beneficial social and ecological outcomes produced, that should NOT be done by monetizing nature. Terms like Payment for Ecosystem Services, Natural Capital, and Natural Assets are terms created by the very economic system responsible for the degraded environment we are passing on to our kids. **The purveyors of these markets do NOT have our best interests in mind.**

In closing, the final recommendation of enhancing the CSP program is a very small start. We must find another way to preserve and uplift our farming community, especially those who are not creating resources concerns, to receive at least a basic universal income.

Again, I thank you for your time and attention in this matter.

Cat Buxton