

House Committee on Agriculture, Food Resiliency, and Forestry Testimony on Universal School Meals, Local Foods Purchasing Incentive Grant, Land Access and Opportunity Board, & Payments for Ecosystem Services

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Alex Lintner (she/her)

Good afternoon,

Thank you members of the House Committee on Agriculture, Food Resiliency, and Forestry for welcoming me today. My name is Alex Lintner, and I am currently the Vermont Field Organizer for Rights & Democracy. I would like to extend my gratitude to you all for your decision to serve Vermont in such a meaningful way.

A little bit about myself: I just moved to Montpelier with my partner. We moved here from the Sacramento Valley in California where we were both farmworkers and food system advocates. Part of what drew us to Vermont is that we know Vermonters are deeply committed to co-creating resilient, just, and ecologically vibrant food and farming communities.

During this session, your committee has a lot of exciting opportunities to advance goals of food justice, land equity, and ecological and community resilience.

Universal School Meals & The Local Foods Purchasing Incentive Grant

Today, many low-income and BIPOC households across Vermont face food insecurity. A 2021 University of Vermont study demonstrated that when compared to white individuals, BIPOC individuals in Vermont were almost twice as likely to go hungry each month from lack of access to affordable and nutritious food. The study also found that households with children were almost twice as likely to face food insecurity in Vermont. Hunger is a racial and social equity issue. Food justice requires implementing changes that guarantee access to nutritious, affordable, and culturally appropriate food for all Vermonters across race and income.

I urge this committee to advance these goals of equitable access and affordability by providing permanent funding and support for Universal School Meals. All children deserve access to nutritious meals to support their learning and development while at school. By providing breakfast and lunch to all students at no charge, you improve nutritional equity and ensure all students have access to healthy meals without stigma.

Additionally, I urge this committee to secure permanent funding and support for the Local Foods Purchasing Incentive Grant which provides a financial incentive to schools to purchase food locally for their school meal programs. This incentive program benefits farmers who need reliable markets and students who need nutritious meals, and it supports a vibrant local economy here in Vermont.

Land Access and Opportunity Board

Food justice also requires implementing changes that ensure social and racial equity in land access. I believe equal access to land is a human right - a right long denied to BIPOC citizens. Farming and land ownership in Vermont is enmeshed with racism and the legacy of slavery, settler colonialism and the genocide of indigenous peoples, and racial capitalism. This multi-century enmeshment has a profound impact today on who owns farmland and who benefits from ownership of farmland. According to the 2017 U.S. Agricultural Census, 97.7% of Vermont farms are white-owned.

For all these reasons and more, I urge this committee to secure permanent funding and support for the Land Access and Opportunity Board. The Land Access and Opportunity Board was created in 2022 to improve land access for BIPOC farmers and other marginalized communities.

Payment for Ecosystem Services

Finally, I urge this committee to take action based on the findings in the final report of the Payments for Ecosystem Services and Soil Health Working Group. I support their pilot program - the Vermont Farmer Ecosystem Stewardship Program - that works to supplement USDA NRCS's Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP).

We all rely on farmers, not only for food and sustenance, but also to protect our natural resources for present and future generations. Farmers who champion climate and environmental stewardship should be compensated for these services.

While farming in California, I engaged with the Healthy Soils Program, a statewide financial incentive program for farmers who adopt practices that enhance soil health. In California, I saw how this additional source of funding for farmers spurred all sorts of innovative on-farm soil conservation projects that otherwise would not have taken place due to lack of financial resources.

In Results of the 2022 Vermont Farmer Conservation & Payment for Ecosystem Services Survey prepared by the Working Group, 94% of Vermont farmers believe they have the knowledge base and technical skills to improve soil health, but only 58% have the financial capacity to implement these soil and society beneficial practices on their farms. This statistic clearly demonstrates that a payment model for ecosystem services and soil health would unlock new and creative conservation potential on farms across Vermont.

When developing and implementing this state-wide pilot it is critical that:

- (1) You continually center farmers' voices and needs, paying particular attention to farmers who have faced historic and ongoing marginalization.
- (2) You do not succumb to carbon tunnel vision, but maintain a holistic vision of soil and ecosystem health.
- (3) You explicitly position this payment for ecosystem services program within the larger Just Transition framework and continually center racial equity across program planning, implementation, and evaluation.

Thank you for your time.