



MEMO

To: Senator Bobby Starr, Chair of the Senate Agriculture Committee
Representative David Durfee, Chair of the House Agriculture, Food Resiliency, and Forestry Committee

From: Bill Suhr, Founder & Orchardist, Champlain Orchards, Shoreham

Date: February 17, 2023

Re: Funding for the Vermont Housing & Conservation Board

I am writing to ask you to continue funding for the Vermont Housing & Conservation Board (VHCB) to give more farmers the opportunity my farm has had: to improve the housing we offer our farm laborers.

The Champlain Orchards are very fortunate to have obtained a \$30,000 forgivable loan during the first round of Champlain Housing Trust's Farm Worker Housing program paid for by a grant they received from the VHCB. Our loan made possible and coincided with our purchase of a large existing residential building here in Shoreham that we hope to renovate for housing for up to 35 seasonal migrant staff members. Taking on the \$400,000 mortgage while knowing the house would require additional investment was intimidating but Champlain Orchards relies on 80 seasonal staff and housing is one of our current limitations when we work to grow our company to better serve our Vermont community. This forgivable loan made us able to make this investment in our company.

We know that employee retention is critical to the ongoing success of any company and housing is very much in short supply in Addison County. We, like many agricultural businesses, have a continuous need for capital to remain competitive and we would be very short sighted if we were not prioritizing caring for our expanding staff who work hard physically six days per week for long hours and deserve the best accommodations we can afford. This program is allowing us to fulfill this vision.

We are using our funds for plumbing and electrical work while we invest in the carpentry work so funds can be stretched as far as possible. As you might expect, we know how to stretch every dollar and we're doing that with the State funds, too. We are upgrading the electrical service, replacing the main electrical panel, relocating the new panel to a dry non-basement location, adding two stand-alone laundry units, and adding a second full bathroom. Our staff has helped with the carpentry work on the second bathroom, and we plan to install a second means of egress from the second floor along with adding a second cooking stove and refrigerator.

Our project for the northern half of the residence serving 15 staff members will only go so far and we are hopeful we can re-apply for a second round of funding this year to help us start to tackle the renovations of the southern half of the house. If we can do that, we will house an additional 20 staff members.

And this isn't just about the Champlain Orchards. I have heard that many farms are challenged to find housing for their staff members. Even our year-round crew relies on supplemental housing provided by the farm. We have six houses/apartments being occupied by year-round tenants and three existing farm labor houses and a third leased building for seasonal labor housing. It's difficult to find decent housing when you work on a farm whether you are a migrant worker or not.

Knowing what a high percentage of our food is being produced with the aid of seasonal migrant help here in Vermont from fruit to meat birds, to vegetable farms, to dairy, etc. it is high time as a state that we help our farmers properly house our labor community. We have disadvantages in terms of scale and weather here in Vermont but we have a wonderful reputation for quality and we hope that the Green Mountain State could also be thought of as a progressive place where farms and their staff are elevated and highlighted as a critical part of our community and working landscape.

Thank you, and I ask that you make every effort to support programs that allow us to improve the working conditions of farmworkers and the sustainability of farmers. Funding VHCB at its full share of \$27.8 million this year will provide an opportunity to see this program continue.