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STATE OF VERMONT
House of Representatives

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March 1, 2024

Dear Chair Lanpher,

I am writing on behalf of the House Committee on Agriculture, Food Resiliency, and Forestry (Committee on Agriculture) regarding the FY25 Budget.

The Committee on Agriculture would first like to highlight its support for these existing base funding amounts that were **included** in the Governor's budget proposal:

- \$500,000 from the General Fund to fund the Local Purchasing Incentive
- \$500,000 for the Farm to School Program
- \$200,000 for Fairs & Field Days
- \$1,000,000 for the Working Lands Initiative

The Committee on Agriculture also supports base funding requests to the following programs and organizations that were **not funded**, or were included at **different levels**, in the Governor's proposal:

- NOFA-VT Crop Cash, Crop CashPlus programs and Farm Share programs.
- VT Foodbank
- Natural Resources Conservation Council
- Small Farms Diversification and Transition Program established in FY24
- Hunger Free Vermont Restaurant Meals Program Navigator (Human Services)

The request for NOFA-VT includes \$328,000 to support the Crop Cash and Crop Cash Plus programs, and \$150,000 for the Farm Share Program, which provides subsidized CSA shares to low income Vermonters. These investments draw down federal dollars and expand access to healthy local food grown in Vermont—all while supporting the farmers who produce the food. Participants can withdraw \$10 SNAP and that can be turned into \$30 through both programs. This allows folks to purchase veggies, proteins and dairy products at any market that accepts Crop Cash. Every dollar spent on local food has a 1.6 multiplier in the local economy.

Two out of five Vermonters are experiencing hunger. The Committee supports a \$2,500,000 appropriation to the VT Foodbank **specifically for the purchase and distribution of food grown or produced in Vermont**. The Foodbank is a major supplier to local food shelves throughout the state. At a time of high food insecurity and both environmental and economic pressures faced by Vermont farms, support for the Foodbank simultaneously addresses these challenges. Fully funding their request would go a long way, not only to fight hunger, but also to support local farms.

Concerning the request from Vermont's Natural Resources Conservation Districts (NRCD), we have heard first hand in our committee the important role our Conservation Districts play in State and Federal natural resource management. They are our conservation delivery system here in the state, delivering agricultural conservation work, streambank protection, clean water projects, restoration education, stormwater and invasive species management, and flood resilience efforts.

The request for base funding is \$3,000,000 and we support the full request. At the **minimum** we want the NRCD to be **level funded** \$612,000 (+\$112,000).

The Small Farms Diversification and Transition Program was established as a pilot and funded with \$150,000 in FY24. Demand has far exceeded the availability of funds, with over 100 applications received to date (the deadline to apply is Monday, March 4). Based on the level of interest, we request that this program be level-funded in FY25 at \$150,000.

\$85,000 to support a Restaurant Meals Program Navigator position in the Agency of Human Services, in order to support the state's participation in the federal Restaurant Meals Program, which allows SNAP/3SquaresVT participants who meet the eligibility requirements below to use their EBT card at restaurants to be able to purchase prepared/hot meals at participating restaurants. The Navigator would provide technical assistance to restaurants with the federal applications necessary to participate in the program, and also to acquire and get trained on the point-of-service equipment necessary for the SNAP participants to use their EBT cards. Folks on SNAP who would be eligible if they are over 60, have a disability, are unhoused, or are a spouse of the above people

In addition, the Committee on Agriculture would like to express its support for the following proposals being recommended by other House Standing Committees:

- Serve, Learn & Earn (Commerce Committee)
- Land Access Opportunity Board (General & Housing Committee)
- Full Funding for the Vermont Housing & Conservation Board (Environment & Energy)

The Committee on Agriculture also requests that the Committee on Appropriations include in the Budget the following **one-time amounts** that were not funded, or were included at different levels, in the Governor's budget proposal:

- \$1,000,000 to establish the Logging Contractor Assistance Program, per the Committee on Agriculture's request for the FY24 Budget Adjustment Act, to provide financial assistance in the form of grants to logging contractors who suffered weather-related revenue losses in calendar year 2023. While farmers and other businesses impacted by the July 2023 flooding benefited from the 2023 BEGAP program and other assistance, contractors engaged in the harvesting and hauling of forest products suffered significant financial losses but did not qualify for the state grant program.

Finally, the Committee is currently reviewing bills that include General Fund appropriations in various amounts. These include:

- H. 813, which would establish the Tree Fruit Farmer Assistance Program. In May 2023, a hard freeze destroyed upward of 90 percent of the apple and grape crops in much of the state. Orchardists and vintners have had no access to existing state relief funds (e.g. BEGAP), and have reported difficulty applying for federal disaster loans.
- H. 624, Forest Economy, which requests \$45,000 to fund a program created by the legislature in 2019 that ultimately reduces Workers Compensation insurance premiums.
- H. 673, which requests \$350,000 in funding to support the outdoor recreation economy.

The members of the Committee on Agriculture present today voted unanimously to support these recommendations. Please contact me if you need additional information or have questions regarding any of these recommendations.

Rep. David Durfee
Chair
House Committee on Agriculture, Food Resiliency, and Forestry