

Farm to School Awareness Day  
February 8th, 2023

Hello honorable committee members and thank you for hearing my testimony. My name is Becca Perrin, and I am the Food Hub Account Manager for Green Mountain Farm to School's local food hub Green Mountain Farm Direct, based in Newport, Vermont.

I ask that you please support the Farm to School & Early Childhood program with a level funded base appropriation of \$500,000 for Fiscal Year 2024. Also, please support the Local Purchasing Incentive program for schools at \$500,000 in base funding.

Green Mountain Farm Direct, or Farm Direct, is a regional mission-driven food hub that partners with Vermont-based farmers and producers to provide affordable, bulk local food to schools, institutions, and retailers across Northern and Central Vermont. We currently regularly service 72 school accounts across 18 Supervisory Unions and 5 private schools & Early Childhood Education centers.

Farm Direct operates as an aggregation and distribution service, as well as providing marketing, sales, and technical assistance to our producer and customer partners. Every dollar that passes through Farm Direct supports Vermont's food businesses, provides Vermonters with fresh, locally produced food, and strengthens the connections within our local food economy.

Farm to School programming and the Local Purchasing Incentive help create a stable food system that includes schools and Early Childhood Centers. When the Local Purchasing Incentive program was launched at the start of the 2021-2022 school year, schools, like all of us, were reeling from the COVID-19 pandemic. Farm Direct saw its sales from schools plummet dramatically during the 2020-2021 school year—a year that forced schools to pivot to to-go meals and forgo scratch cooking, which changed their procurement needs. The Local Purchasing Incentive Program felt like a lifeline, empowering Supervisory Unions to reinforce their budgets and return to local purchasing.

In the Northeast Kingdom, many schools are rural, with enrollments under 100, and tiny procurement budgets for their kitchens. Given these barriers, local purchasing is often a challenge, but the Local Purchasing Incentive is a direct response to that challenge. When Caledonia Central Supervisory Union applied for baseline year funding and received funds from the Local Purchasing Incentive Program in spring 2022, Farm Direct saw them bounce back better than ever into local procurement. They were able to work with Farm Direct to reinvest in their priority of purchasing local products and establish regular deliveries to their seven rural schools. As a result, Farm Direct sales of Vermont-produced and grown food to Caledonia Central schools more than tripled in the 2021-2022 school year from the previous year. The

seven Caledonia Central schools were all empowered to participate in our regular Harvest of the Month delivery program, which sends seasonal items to schools on a monthly basis for their use in menus and educational Farm-to-School programming. We also saw Food Service Director for Cabot School –which has an enrollment of 158 students– Brock Miller increase his regular purchasing of locally raised ground beef from beloved NEK meat producer Brault’s Slaughterhouse in Troy, locally grown and stone ground wheat flour from Morningstar Farms in Glover, and carrots from Pete’s Greens in Craftsbury.

Local products being served in school cafeterias creates ample opportunities for connection between students and their local food system, as well as expanding their understanding of where food comes from. It also opens up new wholesale markets for our local producers, who can rely on Farm Direct for technical assistance with their sales.

Green Mountain Farm Direct saw its overall sales to school customers grow by 25% between the 2020-2021 to 2021-2022 school years. All 52 of our Vermont-based farmers and producers were directly benefited by this sales increase, but it was especially impactful to our small-scale vegetable growers like Joe's Brook Farm in St. Johnsbury whose sales to schools more than tripled in that time period, Heartwood Farm in South Albany whose school sales quadrupled, and West Farm in Jeffersonville whose school sales also quadrupled. We know that these meaningful increases were directly supported by the Local Purchasing Incentive Program, which empowered schools to reinvest their budgets into the local food economy.

Again I urge you to please support the Farm to School & Early Childhood program with a level funded base appropriation of \$500,000 for Fiscal Year 2024, and please support the Local Purchasing Incentive program for schools at \$500,000 in base funding. These programs are critical to the ability for schools and Early Childhood programs to participate in and strengthen our local food system, and create a sustainable food economy for all Vermonters.