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NOFA-VT | VT FEED

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Thank you for inviting me to testify today and thank you for your support of farm to school and early childhood in Vermont. For the record, my name is Kayla Strom, I'm a resident of Richmond, Vermont and I am the Farm to School Coordinator at the Northeast Organic Farming Association of Vermont (NOFA-VT).

I'm here today to ask that you please support the Farm to School & Early Childhood program with level funding base appropriation of \$500,000 for Fiscal Year 2025. Also to please support the Local Food Incentive program at \$500,000 level funding base appropriation.

My role as NOFA-VT's farm to school coordinator is centered around supporting the increase of local foods in schools and early childhood programs and making sure these institutional markets work for our Vermont farmers as well. Aligned with the state's local purchasing goals, the Vermont Farm to School & Early Childhood Network has the goal of reaching 30% local purchasing by 2030. We're not going to achieve that goal without intention and significant investments. National supply chains and corporate consolidation are the default norm in our food system. To reach our target goal, we need to make local foods affordable, easy to procure and available for schools while creating market opportunities for Vermont farms to thrive. When we invest in K-12 local purchasing, we invest in our students, our local economies, and our rural communities.

The Local Foods Incentive provides school nutrition programs with much needed financial resources and encourages them to put Vermont farmers and producers first when making food purchasing decisions. This program clearly illustrates the power of a state incentive to catalyze a shift in institutional purchasing practices.

We're only three years into the Local Foods Incentive and I think it's a helpful reminder that system-wide changes take time. Vermont Food Service Directors are adapting their purchasing, bringing on new producers and vendors, adopting new recipes, and training staff *today* for their grant application next December. When we look at the data outlined in the AOE's 2024 Legislative Report on the Local Foods Incentive, we are looking at purchasing data from school year 22-23 and a lot of those purchasing decisions and menu planning actually took place in the school year before that. So far, we've seen 6 SFA already reach local purchasing targets of 15, 20, and over 25% local. These SFAs, known for engaging in



the 3Cs of farm to school, have long invested in local purchasing. Despite not reaching 15% yet, we're so excited to see 14 other SFA apply for subsequent year grants, regardless of receiving the incentive. This underscores their commitment to tracking and increasing local food procurement.

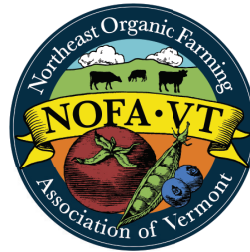
I'd like to acknowledge Scott Fay, the Food Service Director at Essex Westford Educational Community Unified Union School District. In the AOE's Legislative Report for the Local Foods Incentive, you will see that Essex Westford's percentage went up from 2% local purchasing in the school year 2021-2022, to 11% in school year 2022-2023. This huge increase in local purchasing was directly incentivized by the creation of the Vermont Local Foods Incentive and their district investing in farm to school. Scott has made huge strides in his program, including buying Vermont beef for his entire district, purchasing equipment to make processing easier and training staff. When talking with Scott, he is determined and confident that Essex Westford will reach higher local purchasing targets in years to come.

The Farm to School and Early Childhood Network has been working to capture what's working well in cafeterias engaged in farm to school so we can support all Vermont SFAs ability to increase their local purchasing by sharing best practices. We've seen local beef come up again and again as an important product schools can buy to help meet their procurement goals. One resource the Network is working on right now is about how to incorporate local beef into a school meal program with tips for leveraging funding opportunities, procurement and budgeting tips and menu resources.

Vermont school meal programs spend \$20 million dollars on food. That is a huge market opportunity for Vermont farmers. We know when we spend \$1.00 on local food, we circulate \$1.60 back into the local economy. Using those current numbers as an example, when we reach our goal of 30% local, that will mean \$6 million dollars spent on local food for schools, circulating \$9.6 million in our local economy. In the AOE's Legislative Report, I want to highlight that SFAs reporting their local purchasing through the Local Foods Incentive Grant, reported \$1,236,671.01 (over \$1 million) spent on local food. While we still have a lot of work, these programs are carving out a path to get there.

Today, we hope you've heard about the many good things happening because of the investments our Legislature has made in Farm to School and Early Childhood programs. The Agency of Agriculture's Farm to School & Early Childhood Grants program is a big part of this—it offers financial support, expert advice, and coaching to schools, helping them create lasting Farm to School programs. The Local Foods Incentive grant program is already changing how school nutrition programs buy food, putting more money into the pockets of Vermont farmers and producers.

As a reminder, we have come together today to ask for you to please support the Farm to School & Early Childhood program with level funding base appropriation of \$500,000 for Fiscal Year 2025. Also to please



support the Local Food Incentive program for schools at \$500,000 level funding base appropriation. Thank you for inviting me to speak with you all today and thank you for your commitment to making farm to school accessible across the state.

Sincerely,  
Kayla Strom.