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Testimony on H.868: House Committee on Agriculture, Food Resiliency, and Forestry,

Chair Durfee and members of the committee,

My name is Betsy Rosenbluth and I am the Farm to School Director at Shelburne Farms and the Co-Director of Vermont FEED, our farm to school collaboration with NOFA-VT. Shelburne Farms also coordinates the statewide VT FTS&EC Network.

I am excited about the Committee's interest and support of Farm Fresh School Meals For All VT children, and would like to continue to work together on strategies that lead to more local and nutritious foods in school and early childhood meals.

As a FTS Network we have been looking at what barriers remain to realizing our shared goal and how legislators can help.

As our evaluations identified, Vermont school spending on local foods has increased significantly over the past 10 years, from 5.6% in 2013-2014 to an estimated 14% in 2023-2024. That's more than doubled in 10 years. So we know we are moving in the right direction, and acknowledge that structural barriers remain.

Most school nutrition programs want to serve local food but challenges are: inadequate federal reimbursements rates (schools have approx \$1.27 for food on the plate) that has not increased in many years while inflation has risen; inadequate kitchen infrastructure for cooking from scratch and storage of fresh food (many schools only have warming ovens for heating processed foods and little cold storage); and training and labor challenges.

VT has made significant progress in implementing Farm Fresh School Meals for All by passing and investing in Universal Meals, FTS&EC Grants and the LFI. This is in addition to funding on the supply side through the Working Lands Enterprise Fund, VAAFM FTI Market Development Grants, and other supports for producers, so that the supply chain can keep up with the demand we are growing. I just want to appreciate the

Committee's support in making these investments. Our task is how to scale up the progress we have made to all districts and early childhood programs.

Here are some of the gaps we need to address and where we see opportunities:

The LFI is a proven, effective catalyst, and requests from schools have already exceeded funds available. AOE anticipates further demand for these grants over the next few years, before it levels out. When AOE saw that few Food Service Management Companies were participating in the incentive, they drafted model contract language for schools to use with these companies. We are starting to see the benefits of these stronger contracts as more programs with management companies participate in local purchasing.

We need to invest in kitchen infrastructure to support scratch cooking. AOE has a small state equipment grant for schools but it is only \$50K for the entire state - too small and too competitive to reach the need. Expanded infrastructure grants that could support adequate kitchen equipment and storage would be essential for many schools to incorporate more local food and cooking from scratch.

Support the Farm to School and Early Childhood Grant Program at the Agency of Agriculture, Food, and Markets. These grants offer funding for educational and kitchen supplies, professional development and technical assistance. It also subsidizes CSA shares for early childhood programs to encourage local purchasing. Meal programs that access technical assistance through the grant have furthered their successes with expanding local and scratch foods.

We know that 90% of our brain is developed in our first 5 years and in VT, 70% of young children are cared for outside of the home. This makes good nutrition in early childhood settings essential for long term health and success. We need to enact administrative policy that supports inter-agency coordination with the Child Development Division and creates an on-ramp for new programs into CACFP, during licensure.

As Network partners we are happy to work with the Committee on addressing barriers to reaching our goal of farm fresh school meals and food system education for all VT students. Our Agency of Education Child Nutrition staff and our Agency of Agriculture have been excellent partners in this work. We are concerned that a Task Force would stress existing staff capacity already focused on this work. The four strategies we have identified have great promise as next steps to expand scratch cooking and local purchasing across the State.