

House Committee on Agriculture, Food Resiliency, and Forestry
Rural Vermont
4/1/2025

My name is Graham Unangst-Rufenacht, I'm the policy director at Rural VT and a farmer in Marshfield, directly abutting the upper reaches of the Winooski River; a region which saw significant agricultural and non-agricultural impacts related to extreme weather events over the past few years.

Rural Vermont is a 40 year old state-wide, member based, farmer and farmworker led, not-for-profit organization based in Montpelier. Rural VT's mission is to organize, educate and advocate in collaboration with local and global movements to strengthen the social, ecological and economic health of the agrarian communities that connect us all.

We work primarily at the local and State levels - however we also advocate and collaborate in national and international spaces directly and through our membership in the National Family Farm Coalition (where Caroline and I share a seat on the Executive Committee) and La Via Campesina, a peasant and food sovereignty based organization which is one of the largest social movements in the world (where our Director of Grass Roots Organizing Mollie Wills is the primary liaison).

The stories you have heard here today and that you'll continue to hear in testimony on this bill from farmers, from farming organizations and technical service providers like the Intervale Center, Extension, VOF and others - are the stories we hear and have heard, and which inform us in working on this bill, and being here today as an organization. We are not an organization providing farm based technical services for the most part - we focus on organizing, education, and advocacy. We have extensive relationships across organizations, and participate in networks, coalitions, working groups, and direct communications with many of these technical service providers on the grassroots end; and we directly visit and work with farms and farmers and farmworkers based on needs they bring to us, we support them in working with one another in relationship to practicing farm based skills and mutual aid, understanding and crafting and engaging with policy and the regulatory environment, and helping connect them

and their voices to policymakers. Some of our direct on-farm support efforts such as work brigades started in the context of the needs emerging from climate and weather related farming challenges. In relationship to this bill, Rural VT is one of the many organizations across VT's agricultural community that came to a number of meetings over the months prior to this legislative session - and after what were 2 years of particularly extreme weather events dramatically affecting communities and farmers - to draft this bill.

This diverse group of organizations and individuals came together to discuss how our communities have been impacted, what is needed, and how we may work together to accomplish this. We know that existing programs - though a meaningful piece of the puzzle - are not adequate, and that we in particular need a program tailored to the unique needs and vulnerabilities of the agricultural community in VT that can quickly and efficiently mobilize funds in response to a disaster locally. We determined that a state-based fund as you see proposed here would be the most effective means and worked section by section to craft this legislation. We carefully considered the total estimated need financially based on known losses from recent years, and a means of establishing a formula such that this need was updated and adjusted over time; we considered what was a reasonable need and ability and cap for reimbursement; we discussed the most effective / efficient / accessible / and resilient entities for administering the fund in the event of disasters when capacity is stretched thin and needs are quickly emerging; we discussed and determined what an efficient, effective, and accessible application and administration process would entail; we discussed what types of losses would be eligible for reimbursement and what types of events would be "eligible weather conditions"; we discussed the importance of a review board for being able to respond in a nuanced and on-the-ground way.

We knew, and you have heard or will hear from farmers testifying to the fact that, whether you are a medium or large farm that has purchased one or more forms of crop insurance or whether you are a smaller or more diversified farm for whom crop insurance isn't a relevant option and you are using crowdfunding platforms or small grant programs as a means of response - this bill would help you in meeting significant remaining losses when disasters like we have seen affect your farm, and you need immediate financial support to keep your business running, your staff employed; to get your crops replanted, or purchase in

replacement feed or equipment; or any number of impacts threaten to overwhelm your ability to respond and recover as a business and as a person.

According to the 2022 USDA Ag Census, 57% of all Vermont farms were unprofitable and lost a combined \$85 million. At a VT farming conference this winter, a farmer discussing their farm, the impacts of the floods, and their recovery also spoke to the audience in a very humble way acknowledging that, at the end of the day, he knows they don't have to be farmers, and that they can choose to make a living another way. I think we need to take seriously that we have amazingly skilled people doing this essential work, people who have chosen to do this regardless of the acknowledged relative economic marginalization of farming, who are making incredible contributions to our communities and to the progression of horticultural and agricultural practice, who hold skills which assure the meeting of basic human needs and which are increasingly rare, and who are on the edge of making a decision to stop farming in order to make a more secure livelihood, in order to have greater mental health and experience less stress, and for other related reasons. When it comes down to it - farmers are just people, and they have their limitations. But based on what we know from the New England Feeding New England analysis, to achieve even a relatively small portion of regional food security we need many many more farmers, and much more land in farming; we need this to be a more accessible vocation, for there to be more accessible land, for there to be fair prices, and for this work to be compensated with just livelihoods.

This fund doesn't do all of this - but it is critical in this era of significant climate change to meeting the emergent financial needs of farms in times of disasters which may otherwise hasten the decision to close the farm, or sell land or other assets to keep a farm going, or take another job in order to support the family. This fund will both work to support current farmers in an already economically and climatologically challenging environment, and work as an incentive to encourage more folks to farm in VT as it communicates that we value farmers and farming and understand the necessity and vulnerability of this work in an ever more unstable climate. In supporting farmers financially, this fund will also work to protect farmland from development and loss, it will support the engagement of farms with their local communities and economies and related businesses, and it will support their communities' and the region's food security and resilience.

Please let us know if there are particular things you would like to hear more about in relationship to this bill, or from particular types of farms or otherwise. We deeply appreciate your work on this - and your support for this bill and the Farm Security Special Fund.