



Vermont Sustainable Jobs Fund

Accelerating Sustainable Economic Development

February 15, 2026

Dear Chair Durfee and Members of the House Agriculture, Food Resiliency & Forestry Committee:

I am writing to respectfully request that you include \$5 million in your budget memo to House Appropriations to support the Working Lands Enterprise Initiative.

As you well know, forestry and agriculture are cornerstones of the Vermont economy. While there is \$1 million in the Governor's recommended FY27 budget (level base funding from FY26), there is a demonstrated need to increase the state's investment in this impactful program. Based on the level of funding requests over the past 5 years, there are clear market opportunities to be captured and more recently there are elevated risks due to federal budget reductions, the impact of tariffs (i.e., input costs), and climate induced impacts on business in the ag, food and forest sectors.

Vermont's working lands support clean water and air, provide jobs in rural areas, provide outdoor recreation and the views we cherish that support our mental and physical health. Sustainable managed forests provide a range of products from construction materials, to home goods, to sources of renewable energy. Working lands are also foundational to expanding our local food system and maple products sector, supporting increased sales of what is produced here and across New England.

Investments in the Working Lands Enterprise Initiative administered by the Agency of Agriculture, Food and Markets (VAAF) – in partnership with the Agency of Commerce & Community Development and the Department of Forests, Parks & Recreation -- go directly to businesses working the land to keep it productive, employ Vermonters and contribute to the vibrancy of our rural communities. The Coalition sent a letter to VAAF in August, 2025 requesting an increase in base funding of \$500,000 with an additional \$3.5 million in one-time funding this year. Unfortunately, the Governor chose to keep WLEI level funded at \$1 million in his FY27 recommend.

As someone who has served on the Working Lands Enterprise Board since its inception (as an ex-officio member by statute), I have been part of this program's evolution from the very beginning. Each year we assess how well we delivered the program from start to finish and look for ways to make improvements – for applicants, for existing grantees, for grant reviewers, for board processes, and VAAFMs's amazing staff.

But no matter how many improvement we have made to the functioning of this program over the years -- a program that so squarely delivers on its mission and legislative intent -- the hardest part is not having enough funds to support so many eligible and incredible farm, food and forest related projects each year. As you know, in a typical year, there are \$5million in requests for \$1million in available funds. It is clearly evident that \$1million is insufficient to meet the needs of growing working lands business at this time. While we understand that the budget is very tight this year and there are many tough choices to be made, **we strongly encourage you to put the WLEF at the top of your Committee's priority list for funding in your budget memo to the House Appropriations Committee with a request for \$5million.**

I thank you for your ongoing support of the Working Lands Enterprise Fund and encourage you to continue to invest in the Vermont landscape and the people and businesses stewarding it.

Sincerely,

Ellen Kahler
Executive Director
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