

**Testimony of Denise Smith, Executive Director, VCRD**  
**On behalf of the Working Lands Coalition**  
**February 19, 2025 – Rural Caucus Public Forum**

Hello and thank you for holding this forum and for having me in to speak. My name is Denise Smith. I live in St. Albans, VT and I am the Executive Director of the Vermont Council on Rural Development, the backbone organization for the Working Lands Coalition and the Working Lands Partnership.

I am here to request that the Rural Caucus support the Working Lands Coalition's request to *appropriate \$3 million for the Working Lands Enterprise Fund for FY2026*. The Rural Caucus's support of the Working Land Enterprise Initiative has been valuable over the past several years, and we very much appreciate that, and hope that it will continue.

Vermont's Working Lands are a quintessential part of who we are, our identity, and the character of our landscape. These lands are a core value of our identity as Vermonters. The funding we seek helps Vermonters improve their resilience by supporting our agricultural and forestry economies which are necessary for the success of rural Vermont families and communities.

In twelve years, WLEI has directly invested \$18.8 million (a mix of state and federal funding) in 555 farm, food, and forestry projects and leveraged an additional \$30.9 million in matching funds. In 2012, the Vermont Legislature and Governor Shumlin created the Working Lands Enterprise Initiative and Fund (WLEI/WLEF), which was tasked with investing in Vermont's working lands (farm and forest products) enterprises to strengthen our economy, advance job creation, sustain our environment, and keep Vermont beautiful.

We appreciate the \$1 million allocated in the Governor's budget, and we ask you to consider increasing that amount to \$3 million for FY2026. As you may know, the applications continue to far exceed the amount of available funding. According to the VAAFM Impact Report for 2024, applications totaled \$16,187,156, while \$3,150,000 was available.

Grants have been awarded in every single county in Vermont – it is likely that there is a working lands business that benefitted from this program in each of your areas.

The Working Lands Enterprise Grant has been a core funding mechanism for our local economy and has helped Vermonters start, expand, and pivot their businesses so they are able to maintain their existence and contribute to our rural economy. In addition, healthy working lands - our forests and fields - provide our best defense against the extreme weather events we have seen, as they help attenuate and filter our rivers and streams.

Our working lands are a core component of our state's culture, as well as a big part of our resiliency in the face of a changing climate. The people who steward our working lands are important to our state's sustainability as well as our food system security. Our rural economy depends heavily on these businesses, and our rural communities depend on the people who steward our land. I hope you will consider supporting these people and businesses with a total of *\$3 million for the Working Lands Enterprise Fund for FY2026*.

I have included the Working Lands Coalition's handout about our request for your convenience.

Thank you so much for your consideration and for your past support of this important program.



# Working Lands Enterprise Fund: Investment for Transformative Impact

**The Vermont Working Lands Coalition urges the legislature to appropriate \$3 million to the Working Lands Enterprise Initiative in the FY'26 Budget.**

## **Working Lands Enterprise Board (WLEB) Mission:**

The Vermont WLEB unites state, non-profit and private sector leadership to invest in creative economic development in Vermont's working landscape by making essential, catalytic investments in critical leverage points of the Vermont farm and forest economy, from individual enterprises to industry sectors.

## **Act 142 – the Working Lands Enterprise Initiative**

The Vermont Working Lands Enterprise Investment Bill was passed by the legislature in 2012 and signed by Gov. Shumlin as Act 142. The bill created the Working Landscape Enterprise Fund and the Working Lands Enterprise Board, which oversees the Fund (Working Lands Enterprise Initiative). The initiative stimulates economic development in Vermont's agriculture and forest products sectors by systematically advancing entrepreneurship, business development, and job creation.

## **Investment Areas**

Grants directly support **working lands businesses** with strategic investments that influence their value chain, create jobs, boost sales, support worker wellbeing, adapt to climate change, increase production, and preserve or increase working lands acreage.

**Service provider** grants are awarded for technical assistance to support Vermont working lands businesses as they grow, pivot, and adapt to the ever-changing marketplace, or prepare for new capital investment or an intergenerational transfer.

**Producer association** and **trade show assistance** grants provide support with technical assistance, marketing, research, development, and for promoting products at out-of-state trade shows.

*Vermont prospers and its unique sense of place thrives in large part because of intelligent investment in the people and enterprises that comprise its farm, food, and forest-based economy.*

## The Working Lands Enterprise Fund:

- Creates **jobs** in working lands enterprises
- Keeps **young entrepreneurs** in Vermont
- Builds **new markets** for value-added products
- Increases **capacity** for in-state production
- Leverages **more investment** for growing enterprises

## The Working Lands Enterprise Initiative Gets Results!

### In twelve years, WLEB has:

- Funded **555** agriculture and forestry projects
- Distributed over **\$18.8** million in WLEF funding
- Leveraged **\$30.9** million in matching funds
- Benefited all **14** Vermont counties!

### In 2024 alone, WLEB:

- Received over **\$16** million in requests from **345** applicants
- Awarded over **\$3** million to **65** grantees
- Leveraged **\$6.3** million in matching funds
- Benefited all **14** Vermont counties



### Working Lands Coalition Partners:

Cabot Creamery Cooperative | Center for an Agricultural Economy | Intervale Center | NOFA Vermont  
Preservation Trust of Vermont | Shelburne Farms | Vermont Association of Conservation Districts  
Vermont Association of Planning and Development Agencies | Vermont Community Loan Fund  
Vermont Council on Rural Development | Vermont Farm Bureau | Vermont Land Trust  
Vermont Natural Resources Council | Vermont Sustainable Jobs Fund and Farm to Plate  
Vermont Woodlands Association | The Woodstock Foundation