

Vermont House – Agriculture committee

February 6, 2025

The following testimony is from Christine Bourque, organic farmer, Blue Heron Farm, Grand Isle, VT

Good Morning and thank you for the opportunity to testify on the importance of the VT Farm Share program, Crop Cash, and Crop Cash Plus. My purpose for being here today is to ask that you please support NOFA-VT's request for \$500,000 in base funding to strengthen Vermont Farm Viability and Address Food Security by sustaining these two proven programs -Crop Cash, Crop Cash Plus, and VT Farm Share program. My name is Christine Bourque from Blue Heron Farm in Grand Isle, VT. Our farm is a diversified, certified organic, first generation farm that helps feed folks in Grand Isle, Chittenden, and Franklin Counties. We have been farming since 2004. We came to farming for food security for ourselves and our community. Our farm is founded in social justice – so all can eat – because everyone needs to eat. In my previous life, I was a school social worker with children and families and one of the number one challenges I found to be facing families was food insecurity. Today, our family and farm continue our mission to feed folks from all aspects of life – regardless if they can pay or not.

In 2006, we became a participating CSA farm for the Vermont Farm Share/supported shares program through NOFA-VT. This supported farmshare program helps subsidize CSA shares for Vermonters. This program brings down the cost of shares for a limited number of families who really need it and desire clean, local food. This program also makes it more feasible for farms such as ours to provide this important source of local food to these families. While we never turn anyone away from access to what we grow, we can better afford to grow the food and extend our generosity to a greater number of Vermonters by participation in the Vermont Farm Share Program. We have about 80 CSA shares that we offer to our community each year and anywhere from 10-25 families receive some sort of financial assistance.

We have a sliding cost scale (since 2005) for our CSA (Community Supported Agriculture) – where folks prepay for veggies in the winter and then get 18 weeks of veggies from summer through fall (more information about what a CSA is and how ours works on our website www.blueheronfarmvt.com). In spring of 2020, we introduced a Pay What You Can Share, during the height of the pandemic – this is where we could help – where grocery store shelves were empty – LOCAL farmers could provide food and thus stability. These shares are exactly what they are – you pay what you can afford – ten dollars, one hundred dollars or even zero dollars. There are always extra veggies on a farm and there are always folks who can pay a little extra in donation. We continue this share today – in these uncertain times. Folks still need to eat and local farmers can provide and create community. Weekly veggie shares are picked up at our farm in Grand Isle and delivered to several sites in Franklin and Chittenden county. One such site is at the home of a long time CSA member and psychotherapist who coordinates delivery to other families , including some of her clients, who access the Farm Share program through our CSA. I told her I was testifying in front of all of you today and she wrote the following:

“A few highlights from the individuals and families who have benefited from that resource sharing of Blue Heron Farm are:

- A young mother with a preschool aged child who's family receives a donated share told me in a recent session that while they want to expose their picky eater to a wider variety of fresh veggies

and fruits they usually only buy the same 3 items because “we know she’ll eat them and can’t afford to pay for food she won’t eat.” With the variety from the CSA they’ve been able to introduce her to new vegetables without that risk and have involved her in opening their “vegetable surprise” each Tuesday.

- A client who receives a donated share picking up in St. Albans has recently lost access to reliable transportation due to needs for significant car repair. She is able to walk to her pick up location which allows her both to save money on groceries and to not sacrifice produce when she’s walking to pick up items at a grocery store farther away.

- I have cared for an individual with an intellectual disability and physical limitations in my home for over a decade. He proudly wears his BHF farm shirt and cap every Tuesday through CSA season, and calls BHF “our farm”. Christine and Adam have gifted him a rainbow of BHF shirts so we can be sure he has a clean one every drop off day. When his SSTA driver picks him up for his day program and he’s wearing his farm shirt he jokes “you going to give me some veggies when I bring you home?” And my roommate invariably replies “YES! Food is for sharing!” - something Christine and her crew have helped teach him.

These are only three of the many individuals and their families whose lives have been improved by affordable access to organic, local, and fresh food grown, Sold, and shared by BHF. This improvement would not have been possible without Christine, Adam, Sadie, and Delia seeing their roles as farmers as much more than growers, but as a vital part of the community they are a part of. They have done this consistently despite COVID, climate change, personal illness, and very difficult growing seasons. I had a professor who used to say “life is hard and we just have to help each other.” The Blue Heron Farm family does just that, and in turn the systems and resources available to farmers in our state need to help them, so that they can keep growing – not just amazing vegetables and the crunchiest cucumbers I have ever eaten – but the momentum of neighbor helping neighbor that their work embodies and inspires.”

In 2020, our farm signed up to take EBT/3 squares – we have an EBT machine and we can take folks EBT cards to pay for vegetables, meat, and fruit produced on our farm. We are also able to take 3Squares at our local farmers’ market – the Champlain Islands Farmers’ Market on Wednesday and Saturdays. We have been taking 3Squares as a farmers’ market since 2008. The addition of Crop Cash and Crop Cash Plus has been phenomenal. Children hand me their wooden tokens for a cucumber or pint of cherry tomatoes. Their moms hand me crop cash for the bags of potatoes they can now afford to buy with the extra help. Another mother’s eyes grew wide and wet when they could buy pastured pork, beef, and organic chicken and lamb because their Crop Cash Plus made their food dollars go further. Folks love that they can support our farm in their/our community with their food dollars. 3Squares, Crop Cash and Crop Cash Plus SUPPORT the WHOLE Vermont community – the eater and the farmer – it is a double investment, a double WIN. I spread the word to folks about 3Squares and Crop Cash to my community- every single person who accesses this at the farmers market comes back again each week to stock up on healthy LOCAL food. During the height of the Covid 19 Pandemic, we had significant numbers of Pandemic EBT purchases – many families were coming to the market – and we were there – with food and community for them. Many of those community members are still coming to the farmers’ market even though they do not qualify for Pandemic EBT anymore. The Crop Cash and Crop Cash Plus program brings Vermonters to farmer’s markets who otherwise would not come because they are unable to afford what is available there.

In conclusion, thank you for your time and all the good work you do in this committee on behalf of ALL of Vermont's farmers and eaters. Please support NOFA-VT's request for \$500,000 in base funding to strengthen Vermont Farm Viability and Address Food Security by sustaining these PROVEN programs - Crop Cash, Crop Cash Plus, and VT Farm Share program. Thank you for listening, and you can feel free to ask me questions.

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