

Hello members of the House Agriculture Committee. Thank you for making the time to hear from myself and the other members of the Vermont Food Hub Collaborative.

My name is Catherine Cusack and I am the executive director for Green Mountain Farm to School based in Newport. We were incorporated in 2008 and since 2009, we have owned and operated Green Mountain Farm Direct, a non-asset holding wholesale aggregation and distribution food hub serving institutional and retail accounts throughout Vermont. In addition to our food hub we offer a k-12 education program and implement numerous food access and anti-hunger initiatives across the Northeast Kingdom. Our team is small, we have 7 permanent positions, and host 4 AmeriCorps members annually. We reach over 19 schools on an annual basis with farm to school programming and serve more than 4,000 free summer meals to children under 18 with our Lunchbox food truck. Our mission is to strengthen the local food system by promoting positive economic relationships, education and access between schools, farms and communities.

Operating 52 weeks a year since 2009, GMFD has facilitated the sale of over \$4million in local food to schools, hospitals, prisons and retail outlets across northern and central Vermont. Selling and coordinating distribution for 50 farms, with more added during peak season and as opportunities arise, and delivering to over 100 wholesale accounts, accounting for approximately \$850,000.00 in projected sales for FY25.

We do this through a concerted partnership with the Center for an Agricultural Economy who we contract to provide trucking and storage services through their freight enterprise Farm Connex, and the other members of the VFHC. At the close of Farm Direct's order cycle at 11:00 a.m. every Monday, no holidays or snow days are observed, a flurry of emails, texts messages and phone calls are made to answer last minute questions, fulfill orders and convey any delivery changes to other members of the Collaborative. Our teams share multiple spreadsheets, Bill of Lading systems and certifications in support of our farm partners.

Selling and distributing local food to local outlets requires support across the supply chain, from collaborating with farmers on forward contracting so schools can serve healthy nutritious food, to conferring with retail customers on what products they need in order to meet their customer's demand and create economic opportunity throughout.

The systems we have created allow our farm partners to remain competitive in the food marketplace where broadline distributors continue to place unrealistic expectations on farms to meet high minimums, with hidden fees for missed shipments or lagging sales. Green Mountain Farm Direct does not charge our producers for our services and pays fair market value for the cost of goods sold in support of farm viability.

We have built a transactional network that allows us to fill product gaps and meet consumer demand, while providing greater market access for small to mid-sized farms. Currently, GMFD has transactional relationships with all members of the Vermont Food Hub Collaborative. We are able to combine farm pick-ups by using warehouse space and loading docks at The Intervale Center, ACORN and Food Connects. And source from producers that we don't have direct relationships with and are represented primarily by the Vermont Farmers Food Center and ACORN in the southwestern counties and Food Connects in the southeast. While relying on the CAE Farm Connex to make deliveries and store our inventory. We can eliminate unnecessary pickups by storing items at the CAE's new warehouse space, leading to increased access for customers and less paperwork and labor for farms. In turn the other hubs buy food from us that isn't available in their regions, making a round trip much more viable when product is moving both north and south.

The work of the VFHC has seen a tremendous uptick since the pandemic, when we were able to respond to multiple needs due to the time and attention this group (the VFHC) has put into building a resilient local food system. Through our hub to hub transactions we are able to move food from one corner of the state to the other. We have a fee structure and routing procedures well documented. Each hub offers complimentary services to one another. And we have kept an eye on efficiency and sustainability throughout our planning and years of growth.

Newport, and the rest of the NEK, Franklin and Grand Isle counties included, are hard hit with economic downturn, high unemployment rates, low educational attainment and limited access to infrastructure and opportunity as compared with the rest of the state.

But that doesn't mean we aren't capable of building resiliency and overcoming challenges, the last two plus years alone have proven that. We have many partners and work to respond to the food and agricultural needs in the Kingdom as nimbly and responsibly as possible. Farm Direct's ability to support Vermont's farmers and food producers and provide local food to a variety of

populations under disastrous circumstances is directly related to the strength and collaboration inherent within the VFHC.

I thank you for your time today and consideration of our work.