

To the members of the Vermont House Agriculture Committee,

My name is Eli Hersh and my partner and I run Honey Field Farm in Norwich, Vermont. I would like to take this opportunity to share with you how Vermont's food hubs have helped to shape and strengthen our business over the last 11 years, and advocate for increased state support for their programs.

Before launching Honey Field Farm in the spring of 2020, we spent 5 years operating Shadow Creek Farm in Fairfax, which was a small incubator enterprise designed to build momentum and markets that could be leveraged to gain access to long term farmland. This strategy was very successful for us, in no small part due to support from the Intervale Food Hub.

We started Shadow Creek Farm by leasing land and infrastructure from River Berry Farm, where I worked as farm manager. Because we were limited to evenings and weekends, and because we knew we were trying to establish markets who could help us scale up in the future, our goal was to connect with wholesale partners instead of trying to sell our veggies directly to retail customers.

The Intervale Food Hub was one of our very first partners in 2015. We were initially connected with the Intervale through the business development support they offer, which we are extremely grateful to still be utilizing to this day. We were also connected on a more personal level to the Food Hub because I would deliver there for River Berry Farm every week. When we reached out to them about partnering with our tiny, brand new farm, they were immediately supportive and helped us identify a few crops that needed more producers.

The first few seasons we worked together, they offered us opportunities to fill in gaps with crops that were seen as less desirable for other growers. This included orders like 400 x ½ pound bags of green beans, which is a tedious labor of love, but helped us establish a good relationship with the team. Over the seasons as our farm grew and our relationship with the Food Hub strengthened, we were able to let go of some of those less satisfying early crops and focus on growing our strongest crops for them, but what I want to emphasize is that we wouldn't be in the position to do that if they hadn't prioritized supporting a tiny new farm back in 2015, and then prioritized helping our relationship grow over the years following.

When we started to outgrow Shadow Creek Farm and look for a larger long-term opportunity, our friends at the Intervale Food Hub supported us by writing a letter of commitment, stating that they had the intention of scaling up their purchases from us as soon as we were ready to ship more product. This was extremely helpful in convincing our financiers that we could take the leap from a part-time farm grossing under \$40,000 per season to a diversified farm selling over \$500,000 annually in just a few years.

In the five years since we took that leap, we have seen the Intervale Food Hub follow through with the support they indicated in their letter of commitment. Through the changes in their business model they have remained consistent in prioritizing purchases that support us as a partner farm, staying flexible as we adapt to challenging weather and field conditions, and exploring possibilities for additional sales opportunities. Through IFH we have developed an annual partnership with Sodexo which features our multi-color bell peppers in UVM's dining halls every September, as well as connections with several programs supporting food access for schools and marginalized communities.

In addition to the support we receive from IFH through their purchase of our produce, we also appreciate the opportunity they provide to farmers in offering dry, refrigerated and frozen warehouse space to rent by the pallet. This helps farmers who may not have that infrastructure on their farm store product somewhere safe and secure for a very reasonable price. While we have a lot of storage space

on our farm, we have frequently utilized the cross-docking services that IFH provides by shipping product to their dock and having some of our customers pick it up there.

Intervale Food Hub is who we have had the most experience working with through our farm journey over the last 12 years, but we have also appreciated support and opportunities through CAE and Food Connects, and know that there is a strong network of food hubs in this state who have been transformative in Vermont's food economy and continue to do critical work in our communities. It is hard to imagine what our business would look like without these food hubs. In addition to purchasing product outright they also provide valuable opportunities for local food makers to connect with each other, pool resources, and utilize each other's high quality products. The food hubs offer a supportive starting point for many producers to help them learn more about industry standards for wholesale product quality and packaging and growing for contract orders. They allow many farms who aren't set up for retail sales know that their products are going directly to Vermont families. They provide an outlet for huge range of products from meat and cheese to veggies to value-added products (like our Honey Field Farm hot sauce, for example). They create a community of producers and bring their products together into curated offerings that highlight the strong tradition of local food production in this state.

In Vermont we pride ourselves on the strength of our communities and our local food system. I feel fortunate to live in a state where we see this prioritized on a legislative level and appreciate this opportunity to be sharing my perspective at the state house today. I hope this committee will recognize the immeasurable contributions our network of food hubs make every day, and agree that increasing support for them will benefit the entire state.

With federal funding in jeopardy, it is critical that the state of Vermont step in to support our food hubs. As growers we have already lost several purchase contracts due to the cancellation of the federal Farm-to-school and farm-to-food bank funds, some through Intervale Food Hub. It would be wise for Vermont to explore funding these programs from a local level, as well as ensuring we maintain our free school lunch program across the state. Despite the challenging economic times we are in, I would actually advocate for an increase in funding for Vermont food hubs and programs like these, since we have seen the multi-level benefits they provide to not only farmers and local families, but to the local economy as a whole.

Thank you for your consideration,

Eli Hersh

Honey Field Farm

Norwich, VT