

Testimony to the Vermont House Agriculture Committee

3/20/25

Good morning, members of the House Agriculture Committee. Thank you for hearing my testimony.

My name is Becca Perrin, and I am the account manager for Green Mountain Farm Direct, a program of Green Mountain Farm to School in Newport, VT. We are one of four Vermont food hubs that administered Local Food for Schools (LFS) funds during the 2023-2024 school year. The other hubs are Food Connects in Brattleboro, ACORN in Middlebury, and Vermont Farmers Food Center in Rutland. I am here today to share the impact of the \$333,763 in LFS funding on Vermont schools and regional farms, as well as to demonstrate the need for sustained investment to maintain the progress we've made in Vermont's Farm-to-School movement. During the first installment of LFS in the 23-24 school year, all four hubs witnessed schools experiencing the benefits of local food for the first time, while our farm partners gained access to new school markets that were previously out of reach. This progress is now at risk without ongoing support.

Food hubs are stewards of local food, acting as the intermediary between those interested in buying local products and farms and food businesses interested in selling them. We are the sales and customer service rep, broker, aggregator, inventory manager, distributor, and marketer all in one. And in Vermont, each of the four food hubs that administered LFS is a mission-driven non-profit, so we are able to do this work while prioritizing impact over a bottom line. In fact, no administrative or personnel costs were allowed under LFS, so every cent of the \$333,000 either paid for the food or for the costs associated with moving it.

One of the most significant achievements of LFS was establishing delivery logistics to ensure that at least one of the four food hubs could serve all 69 School Food Authorities in the state, no matter how rural. This was no small feat. Thanks to these efforts, **90 individual Vermont schools ordered from a food hub for the very first time**, creating brand-new sales relationships and opening doors to local procurement.

Feedback from schools showed high satisfaction with the local products. Many were excited to try items typically beyond their budgets, such as specialty meats, cheeses, pasta, lightly processed vegetables, and premium pickles and ferments. For other schools, LFS funds allowed them to substitute local options for staple ingredients like produce, yogurt, ground beef, maple syrup, and milk, integrating these into their regular menu items.

One story comes from Megan Lavalley, School Nutrition Director at Maple Run Unified School District in St. Albans, who shared:

(quote)“With the support of LFS funds across all Maple Run schools, our students had the opportunity to discover foods they had never encountered before. Each day, they enjoyed treats such as Maple Cheese Curds, Pickled Carrots, Kimchi, and even local hot sauce. While these items were very popular at the high school level, we were pleasantly surprised by the enthusiastic reactions from elementary students as well. Our school's fruit and veggie bars have never looked more appealing, filled with vibrant Beets, Rainbow Carrots, and Watermelon Radishes. This exposure to beautiful Vermont veggies and the experience of trying new, boldly flavored foods produced locally by our farmers will leave a lasting impression on our students.” (end quote)

However, in the absence of funding support this school year, many of the newly engaged schools struggle to continue purchasing local food—not due to a lack of interest or demand, but because of the persistent budgetary constraints that LFS helped alleviate.

On the farm side, **147 farms across the region benefited from LFS funds**, with **66 farms making their first-ever sale to a school during the LFS year**. This proved that these farms offered products that fit food service specifications and demand while also catering to K-12 students' appetites. Nearly all of Green Mountain Farm Direct's producer partners experienced substantial sales growth in school markets. For example, Pitchfork Pickle of South Burlington saw a remarkable increase in school sales of 1,092%. Other producers like Blue Ledge Dairy of Salisbury (771%), Hurricane Flats of South Royalton (453%), Sweet Rowen Farmstead of West Glover (519%), and Berry Creek Farm of Westfield (443%) saw significant boosts as well. But it also again highlighted the persistent budget barriers that make these connections with school markets difficult to create and maintain without support. Notably, **97% of benefiting farms were small businesses** and **52% were socially disadvantaged**

as defined by the USDA. This funding supported equitable access for these farms to reach new markets and grow their businesses.

Julia Irish, Owner of Pitchfork Pickle shared this perspective:

(quote)“Our reason for being is locally grown produce. We make pickles and ferments from Vermont-grown vegetables. We saw a substantial jump in schools ordering our products for use in their meal programs last year. The funding cuts impact not just our company's sales, but the local farmers we buy from. The disconnect between the school food program budgets and the reality of costs of production for local food have historically made this relationship prohibitive, whereas the LFS program bridged that gap. This program seems like a win for everyone—nutritious food in schools, supporting local farms and food producers, keeping funds in our local and often rural economies—cutting it doesn't make sense and feels like a spiteful cost-cutting measure that hurts everyone involved.” (end quote)

The success of LFS has shown that Vermont has the infrastructure, farms, and schools ready to prioritize local food. However, without sustained funding, some of the progress we've made will fade. Programs like LFS are not just about putting fresh food on students' plates—they are about strengthening local economies, supporting farm viability, and ensuring that every child has access to nutritious, delicious meals.

The \$1.2 million in funding for Vermont under LFSCC would have built on the momentum created by the first installment of LFS, ensuring that the connections between schools and farms continue to grow and thrive. The multiplier effect of \$1.60 per \$1 spent on local food would mean \$1.92 million back to the local economy, making the investment meaningful beyond feeding students and supporting farms.

For schools, it would have meant the ability to plan menus confidently around seasonal local ingredients, ensuring that students continue to benefit from fresh, nutritious foods year-round while fostering a deeper understanding of where their food comes from. Since the program was planned to span two school years, 2025-2026 and 2026-2027, schools could have been able to make long term purchasing decisions to sub in local products for commodities and conventional items, and save budget dollars for future years.

For farmers, it would have created dependable, long-term demand, allowing them to lean into these new market opportunities, forward plan, invest in scaling their operations, and diversify product offerings. This investment would have a far-reaching ripple effect across Vermont's economy, impacting every stop along the journey from the farmers growing the vegetables, to the folks processing and packaging them like Pitchfork Pickle or Just Cut, to warehouse staff and truck drivers at the Center For An Agricultural Economy, to school kitchen staff receiving deliveries and preparing the food, to students enjoying the fresh meals, to teachers and families who share the benefit of a well-fed child. This is the values-driven, strong local supply chain Vermont needs and deserves.

Ultimately, LFS proved that schools want local food, producers can meet the demand, and food hubs play a crucial role in making it happen. However, without sustained funding, much of this progress is at risk. The \$1.2 million from LFSCC would have meant maintaining these connections, strengthening Vermont's local food system, and ensuring schools have reliable access to fresh, high-quality, locally sourced ingredients, as well as create new opportunities for connection between Early Childhood Centers and local farms.

I urge you to consider the long-term benefits that programs like LFSCC bring to our communities and to support ongoing funding that builds on this foundation. Together, we can create a resilient farm-to-school network that nourishes our students, empowers our farmers, and sustains Vermont's agricultural future.

Thank you for your time and consideration.