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March 20, 2025 - Testimony for House Agriculture, Food Resiliency, & Forestry Committee  
Re: Impacts of USDA roll back of the Local Foods for Schools & Child Care Funding

Good morning and thank you for hearing my statements today.

For the record, my name is Cynthia Greene. I live in South Burlington and work at Shelburne Farms as the Farm to Early Childhood Partnership Coordinator.

I am here this morning to share how the recent cut to the Local Foods for Schools and Childcare program may directly impact early childhood programs, families, farms, and food distribution innovations.

It is devastating to know that the federal government has canceled the Local Food for Schools and Child Care (LFSCC) program, which intended to provide the Vermont Agency of Agriculture, Food, and Markets (VAAFAM) \$1,222,076 in LFSCC funding. It is important to note that 100% of this \$1.2 million was dedicated to food purchases, meaning it would have gone directly into the hands of Vermont farmers.

This cut certainly impacts our agricultural community, however it is also deeply concerning for early childhood programs operating the Child Adult Care Food Program (CACFP), many of which operate on razor thin margins and struggle to maintain nutrition programming. In Vermont, just over 300 early childhood programs participate in CACFP and would have benefited from the \$277,850 designated for childcare. Early childhood nutrition services are drastically under-resourced, administrative funding is almost nonexistent, and the LFSCC funding could have shored up local food related expenses thereby easing financial tensions and allowing programs to invest in kitchen infrastructure, staffing and other nutrition service expenses while maintaining high quality nutritious foods in their menus.

Another ripple effect of this federal cut is that due to the timing of the cut, and the understandable capacity constraints on our Vermont Agency of Agriculture Food and Markets staff managing these frenetic circumstances, our state Community Supported Agriculture grant for early childhood programs is not being offered this year. This is another resource loss to our early childhood field and further limits their access to local nutritious foods. Based on 2024 data, VAAFAM awarded \$45,000 to early childhood programs for CSAs across the state. However, because the grant is structured to support at a maximum 80% of any share, the total loss to our producers is upward of \$56,000.

I do want to carefully note here, that while the CSA grant is not available this year, the CSA pot of funding has been reallocated within the VAAFAM Farm to School Grant Program to the Vision Grant. Early childhood programs can apply and request support for local food access, however the Vision grant opportunity does not leverage additional community dollars for local food purchasing like the CSA grant so there will still be a small net loss to our farming community.

Losing access to financial support for local food naturally causes early childhood programs to consider their operating budgets and make tough purchasing decisions. Programs have already indicated they may not be able to keep up with food price points and if local foods are more expensive, they will need to make alternative choices. In some instances of fiscal crisis, like during the pandemic, programs shuttered their nutrition services altogether and did not re-open them.

These decisions impact local purchasing of course but also impact families. Many families rely on early childhood programs for nutrition services which often introduce families to the local producers through community events, highlighting farms and products on program menus or through educational activities – thereby expanding farm markets to families through relationship-based programming.

On a call yesterday with the Farm to School and Early Childhood Network, Annie Paradee of Long Winter Farm in Stowe spoke of her connection with Mountain Village School, an early childhood site her children attend. Annie's farm sells products directly to the program and has developed relationships with other community members who also now support their farm. We also have a story from Laura Butler in Milton who sources food from farmer Christine of Blue Heron Farm. Laura tells the story of how her families and even her neighbors have developed relationships with Christine through an initial CSA grant, and that now several families and neighbors buy personal CSAs from Christine and Blue Heron Farm. And Beth Traver Adolphus of Oak Hill Children's Center in Pownall has shared that local farmers and producers supported their "Family Farm Day" event by showcasing farm animals, farm equipment, gardening tricks and their products at their Community Harvest Dinner. It is because families are so intimately connected to our early childhood programs that these programs are uniquely positioned to foster farm to family relationships through their local purchasing values and practices.

Another impact of the loss of LFSCC funding that concerns me personally is the work our partners in the Upper Valley have been advancing to improve food access and distribution to early childhood programs in that region. While the LFSCC funding had not yet supported this project, partners were relieved and planning to increase their local food purchasing. That funding was also poised to help partners leverage other funding opportunities to support additional aspects of the pilot such as equipment and infrastructure needs as well as fiscal agent and administrative supports. The goal of this pilot is to test purchasing and distribution options that can increase food access and the local food purchasing power of early childhood programs. It is open to any registered early childhood program in the Upper Valley region including those not operating CACFP. The loss of the LFSCC funding will require partners to re-examine local food purchasing based on budget constraints and other project related expenses. It is dampening our innovation.

Finally, it would be remiss of me not to mention Vermont's Child Care Legislation, Act 76. This Act has shored up our early childhood system and services by decreasing financial stressors for both programs and families, providing workforce stabilization resources, and increasing system capacity to serve more children. It has also allowed some programs to maintain and improve nutrition services. Should any portion of this Act be rolled back or funding be cut, it will be another devastating loss for our early childhood programs. We know through focus groups organized by Hunger Free Vermont that when programs are faced with agonizing financial choices to stabilize programming, nutrition services are often one of the first services they cut.

At this moment in time, Vermont's early childhood system faces the loss of Local Food for Schools and Child Care funding, the VAAFM Community Supported Agriculture grants, and a proposed cut in Act 76 funding. These losses will absolutely impact local food purchasing, mitigate the market potential of our 900 early childhood programs, decrease family exposure to our local producers, could jeopardize the stability of nutrition programming, and leave more families and children in uncertain food access circumstances. The ripple effects of these losses are challenging to quantifiably forecast but they are not difficult to anticipate. I deeply appreciate your consideration of these challenges and your creative solutions to mitigate their impact. I am happy to answer any questions.

Thank you for your time and attention this morning.