

Becky Maden  
NOFA-VT Board member  
January 24, 2025  
Vermont Farm Security Fund

Thank you very much for having me here to speak with you today. And thank you to NOFA-VT and so many organizations who collectively worked to put together this proposed bill. My name is Becky Maden and I am a NOFA-VT Board member and vegetable farmer in Orwell. I am also a soil health specialist with UVM Extension, supporting vegetable farmers around the state to implement soil health practices.

I don't need to describe to you how deeply existential the threat from climate change is. But for the people who work with the land—our farmers, who grow food for our communities--the raging abnormality of these events are catastrophic, and will only grow more so. As Peter Kalmus, a climate scientist who until recently lived in Altadena, California said in an interview, "It's not a new normal. A lot of climate messaging centers around this idea that it's a new normal...We, humanity, we've got a real crisis here, and we're ignoring it."

In Vermont and much of the Northeast, we've heard the predicted impacts climate change will have on agriculture, but we, too, are quickly learning that this is not a new normal that fits neatly into a scientific model. Instead, we are reacting to events as they take place in real time, never quite prepared enough to halt the damage, but never entirely surprised it happens either. The good news is that we are cohering together as farmers and farm supporters, with creativity, agility, and strength, learning to be adaptive and persistent. We are also learning where our vulnerabilities are. This proposed legislation is an effort to address one significant vulnerability for farmers impacted by climate: financial loss.

Based on survey data from the VAAFM, the financial impact of climate related events in 2023 across Vermont's food system was approximately \$69,000,000 (VT Ag Recovery Task Force Impact Report, 2023). Flooding alone impacted 264 farms on 27,318 acres. On average, farmers lost 28% of their annual income in 2023 due to severe weather and flooding. My own small farm in Orwell was no exception to these loss figures. And as you know, 2024 was a near repeat of the 2023 flooding.

Much of the funding for my work at UVM Extension comes through the clean water improvement program, so I provide technical assistance to help farmers implement soil health practices. When extreme weather washes away soil and nutrients, even farmers implementing the best soil health practices can lose ground (often literally) on progress towards clean water improvements. Financial losses from these events also mean farmers don't have time, money, or mental capacity to implement good soil health practices. In other words, these events are not only having direct impacts on farmers'

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livelihoods, they are also undoing Vermont's good work to clean up surface water, keep agriculture viable, and promote a clean and healthy environment.

While creating a farm security fund will not solve the climate crisis nor will it repair a broken farm economy, it can play a critical role in getting farms through urgent and temporary periods of loss. They need to make payroll, pay off loans and mortgages regardless. It's also important that this money gets to them right away. Last year, as the flood waters were rising, I reached out to all the farmers I know who were likely to flood. Again and again I asked how I could help. And again and again, I got a similar answer: we just need money to get through this. As one farmer posted on their blog, after the flood in 2023, they were able to "rally and clean up" but when it flooded the second year in a row, the aftermath "had a different effect: daunting and downright depressing." Go fund me's are a beautiful testament to community good will, but they cannot be our mechanism for keeping Vermont agriculture alive.

We also know that it is hard to plan for the unknown, especially a scary one. The Northeast is certainly getting wetter due to climate change, but it is also getting hotter, windier, and drier, leading to possible losses from fire, drought, and heat stress along with flooding. Farmers have already been preparing for these realities; I see investments in irrigation, crop diversification, wind breaks, soil organic matter, and agroforestry. Farmers are innovators and they are not hesitant to invest in the land. Climate events are momentary disruptors, but with a little help, farmers will survive, and even thrive. This proposed bill is a critical step in ensuring that farmers can quickly recover from events and continue stewarding Vermont's agricultural land.