

NOFA-VT Introduction to House Agriculture, Food Resiliency & Forestry Committee

Presented by Grace Oedel, Johanna Doren, Maddie Kempner

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Thank you, Chair Durfee and committee for inviting us to come talk with you today. We're really looking forward to getting to know and work with this committee.

My name is Grace Oedel and I'm the executive director of NOFA-VT. I'm here today with several of my colleagues and members of our board, who will introduce themselves as they come up to speak.

We're excited to share a little background about NOFA with you today, in addition to sharing our legislative priorities. Our organization may be new to some members of the committee, and even for those who have heard of NOFA, there are lots of different ways people intersect with our work and some aspects you might be less familiar with. In the folders in front of you, you'll find handouts on our Local Food Security programs and funding request, a handout on the Farm Security Fund, and our annual impact report which is a great way to learn a little more about our work.

We are a statewide, member-driven organization. NOFA-VT was founded in Putney, Vermont in 1971, making us one of the oldest organic farming associations in the U.S. We have a majority farmer board and nearly 1,300 members around the state – and our membership is growing. At the end of 2023, we had about 1,160 members, which increased by 11% in the past year. We also reach about 12,000 people around the state and region with our newsletters.

Our mission is up on the screen here, but what it comes down to is the understanding that when we get food and farming right, we can support both people and the planet to thrive.

Farmers produce the food that feeds us all – and we know that thriving farms benefit our state and each of our communities in so many other ways as well. Some of those are named here, and we could all probably add to this list.

NOFA works in a lot of different ways to support farmers, and to ensure everyone has access to the food they produce. Our farmer services team provides direct support to farmers in the form of 1:1 business planning and technical assistance, mentorship and cohort programs for farmers to learn with and from each other, funding opportunities like our Resilience Grants, climate resilience planning, and organic transition support for farmers looking to become certified organic.

Our policy and organizing team, including our member-led policy steering committee, works to listen to and bring the voices of NOFA's members to our state and federal policymakers.

[Johanna can share about our educational programming, our work to grow direct and wholesale markets for farmers, and to increase food security through our local food access programs.]

Finally, Vermont Organic Farmers (VOF) is a USDA-accredited certification program owned by NOFA. VOF was formed by farmers in 1985 and currently certifies 725 farms and processors around the state to the National Organic Program standards.

Over NOFA's lifetime, organic has really grown to become a significant movement and way of farming here in Vermont. At the end of 2024, VOF certified almost 162,000 acres of farmland and VOF producers gross sales totaled over \$377 million. We currently certify 117 dairies, 168 vegetable and/or fruit farms, and 250 maple operations. Each of these farms has a substantial positive impact on our communities, our landscape, and our rural economies. For example, over 86,000 acres of forestland is being managed by organic sugarmakers in ways that support bird and other wildlife habitat, and protect the overall health of the trees and the forest ecosystem - while providing jobs and producing a delicious product.

In order to continue supporting our farmers and all Vermonters having access to nourishing, local and organic food, we are focused on a few key legislative priorities this session.

First, we're asking you to increase and provide base funding for our Crop Cash (Plus) and Farm Share programs, which Johanna will share more about in just a moment. We're also asking you to pass the Farm Security Fund, a new bill that we expect to come before your committee soon that Maddie will share a bit more about.

Farm to School

Next, NOFA is a core member of the Farm to School and Early Childhood Coalition, and we're supporting their request of level, base funding of \$500,000 for Farm to School / Early Childhood Grants, as well as \$500,000 for the Local Foods Incentive Grants. Our colleague Kayla Strom leads NOFA-VT's Farm to School work, and you'll see her in the state house and likely in your committee this session. Feb 12th is Farm to School Awareness Day in the Legislature and schools are looking forward to sharing the impact of the Legislatures support.

Food Security Roadmap

NOFA is also a core partner in working on the Food Security Roadmap to 2035,. In the meantime, we want to make sure you know that the priorities we're sharing with you today are essential strategies in moving us toward a future where all Vermonters are food secure.

Local Food Security

NOFA-VT is requesting \$500,000 in base funding to strengthen Vermont farm viability and address food security by sustaining two proven programs: Crop Cash (Plus) and Farm Share.

- Crop Cash doubles 3SquaresVT (SNAP) benefits for fruits and vegetables

purchased at Vermont farmers markets.

- This program has been in Vermont for over a decade and the demand has grown immensely since the Covid-19 pandemic as a way to keep local food affordable. It is majority federally funded, though it requires NOFA-VT to raise local “matching” funds from other sources. So, every state dollar invested in this program helps draw down federal funds.
- Crop Cash Plus was a 2023 pilot that expanded Crop Cash to all SNAP-eligible foods (meat, eggs, dairy, bread) – beyond just produce, which Crop Cash is limited to.
 - This expansion was incredibly successful in helping low-income Vermonters stretch their SNAP dollars further and meet their nutritional needs more comprehensively. It also doubled the number of farmers that benefited from the program, providing a significant income source to producers of dairy, meat, eggs, and more. Unfortunately, the Crop Cash Plus expansion had to be paused in 2024 due to lack of funding.
 - State funds will allow us to 1) draw down more federal funding so that we can continue operating Crop Cash at its increased demand, and 2) offer the hugely impactful Crop Cash Plus program again, which we cannot operate without State funding.
- Finally, Farm Share subsidizes CSA shares for limited-income Vermonters by paying for 25-75% of the CSA cost.
 - Farm Share has been around for 30 years. We work with over 60 farms to provide hundreds of households with a consistent supply of fresh food from a local farmer each season. Demand increases every year as affordability continues to be a challenge for many. Farm Share has acted as a “lifesaver” for low-income Vermonters, while funneling tens of thousands of dollars directly into our local farmers’ pockets.

We were grateful to receive \$300,000 in one-time funding in the FY25 state budget to support food security through Crop Cash and Farm Share. So far this year, we have served at least 800 households in getting consistent, fresh, local food at an affordable price. This is a 13% growth compared to 2022, and 150% growth compared to pre-pandemic numbers in 2019.

We are asking for \$500,000 in base funding in FY26 so that we can continue to meet the increasing demand for these food security programs, continue to draw down federal and philanthropic funds, *and* fill the funding gap for the Crop Cash Plus expansion. Food security can and should be achieved for everyone who lives in Vermont. At the same time, we can support our farmers and ensure they can profit from growing the food we all need and want. Crop Cash (Plus) and Farm Share are proven programs that help Vermont achieve both of these goals, providing vital income to farmers and making local food more affordable for Vermonters. Thank you for supporting our farmers and low-income Vermonters.

Farm Security Fund

We are also asking the legislature to pass the Farm Security Fund. This is a new piece of legislation that will provide reliable, rapidly available recovery funds to farmers impacted by climate emergencies and extreme weather.

NOFA has had our Farmer Emergency Fund in place since 1997. Since that time, and especially in the past two years, we've learned a lot about what farmers go through when a flood or other weather emergency happens. The state collectively has learned a lot. We know that federal programs like crop insurance are not designed for or accessible to many of our farmers here in Vermont. The Agency of Agriculture's survey following the flooding in 2023 found that 70% of applicants were not covered by crop insurance.

The Business Emergency Gap Assistance (BEGAP) program provided meaningful support to farmers and many other businesses impacted by flooding in 2023 and again last year. But we know we can learn from and improve upon that process, make it better suited to the specific needs of working lands businesses, and get funds out more quickly to allow our farmers to get back to producing the food we all need.

We know from our direct experience administering the emergency fund that rapid relief funds can make a huge difference to a farmer immediately following a disaster, and can allow them to cover things like payroll to be able to keep their employees on board to aid in clean-up and recovery. We also know that farmers in the midst of a crisis shouldn't have to make seeking support their full-time job, as many have told us it becomes.

Most of the current programs and systems for farm disaster aid involve complex, administratively burdensome paperwork and in the end, often provide too little meaningful relief to make the hassle worthwhile. All of this further taxes a farmer's mental health in a time of crisis. Farms are the heart of our culture and community in Vermont, and we know we can do better to help them rebound when emergencies happen.

We look forward to sharing more with you about the Farm Security Fund in the weeks to come.

Finally - here are the faces of NOFA staff you can expect to see in the state house this session. In addition to the four of us here today, you'll see our farm to school program manager Kayla Strom.

Thank you again for your time and your work. We're happy to answer any questions you have for us now or after you hear from Joe, Becky and Melisa.