

Hello, I'm Claire Georges, owner of Butterfly Bakery of Vermont. Thank you for being here today and for giving us Working Lands grantees the opportunity to speak. I'm grateful for the chance to share not only my own experience, but also to help illustrate the multiplier effect this program has across farms, jobs, and the broader Vermont economy.

I started Butterfly Bakery of Vermont as a small, one-person, middle-of-the-night, maple-sweetened wholesale bakery in 2003. I was baking alone, delivering my own products, and doing everything by hand. Twenty-two years later, our products are sold in every state and seven countries. Our hot sauces have been featured on the hit YouTube show *Hot Ones* four times, and we have been recognized in *Food & Wine Magazine* for having the best hot sauces in the country.

That kind of growth and evolution does not happen in a vacuum. I was able to go from a small bakery to an internationally recognized hot sauce manufacturer because of the long-term, patient investment that the State of Vermont makes in agriculture and in the businesses that depend on it. Butterfly Bakery of Vermont received two Working Lands grants last year, a \$45,000 Business Enhancement Grant focused on marketing and a \$5,000 Trade Show Grant to attend the NYNOW trade show.

We have also received technical assistance and support from the Vermont Sustainable Jobs Fund, an organization that plays a critical role in delivering Working Lands funding and expertise to businesses like mine. That guidance, strategic support, and long-term perspective has helped us turn grant funding into lasting operational change, not just short-term spending.

But just as importantly, we have benefited for most of our existence from years of Working Lands grants received by the farms and agricultural businesses we rely on every single day.

Butterfly Bakery of Vermont is a farm-to-fork food manufacturer. That means that 100% of our milk, produce, and maple are sourced directly from small farms within 200 miles of our Barre, Vermont kitchen, and almost entirely from within Vermont. That sourcing is not accidental. It is possible because Vermont farms are supported, stabilized, and strengthened by consistent public investment.

In 2003, I did not set out to be a farm-to-fork food manufacturer. What I set out to do was make the best food with the best flavor. Again and again, I found that the ingredients with the best flavor came from Vermont soil. Historically, farm-to-fork food has been the domain of high-end restaurants, with price points reserved for special occasions alone. Because one of my superpowers happens to be logistics, I've been able to take that rarified, occasional world of farm-to-fork and turn it into something repeatable, distributable, and every day.

When small farms grow primarily for restaurants, they are limited by very real constraints. They are limited by the number of table turns on a Saturday night, by how many leafy greens can be harvested and sold before they wilt, and by how long squash can sit in storage before quality declines. That model is valuable and important, but it is inherently capped by time, seasonality, and perishability.

When farms grow for food manufacturers, those same crops can be transformed into shelf-stable products that last years and can be sold not just across the state, but around the world. Manufacturing removes the ceiling that perishability places on farm income and replaces it with predictability, scale, and long-term demand.

Farm-to-fork restaurants play a critical role in discovery, experimentation, and delight. They introduce new flavors and celebrate seasonality. Farm-to-fork food manufacturers, on the other hand, are designed to create repeatable, dependable staples. They take Vermont-grown ingredients and turn them into products that can show up in a home kitchen on a Tuesday night, at any price point, all year long. Together, these models don't compete with each other; they complete the system.

Building and maintaining that kind of system requires more than good intentions or good ingredients. It requires investment, expertise, and support in areas that even strong, successful businesses don't always have internally. Every business owner has something they're not good at.

And that's where you come in.

For nearly twenty years, I grew Butterfly Bakery of Vermont entirely through word of mouth. When you start with extraordinary ingredients, people talk. Through that organic growth, I was able to cross that million-dollar gross sales threshold which is something that only two percent of women business owners ever achieve.

What that growth masked, however, was a real vulnerability. While I can make logistics and manufacturing sing and dance to my whim, sales and marketing are far outside my wheelhouse. When the world changed, as it has repeatedly over the last twenty-two years, I didn't know how to intentionally guide how my business changed with it. I recognized that I needed to control our narrative, but I didn't yet have the tools to do that in a changing marketplace.

So in 2025, I applied for a Working Lands Business Enhancement Grant to invest in improving our marketing efforts. The impact has been transformative. Not just because of how the funds were spent, but because of the foundation the grant gave us to build upon.

In that same year, we were able to secure outside investment for the first time. A key reason investors were willing to take that leap with us was our participation in the Working Lands program. We could point directly to the trust the State of Vermont had placed in us and in our plans. The message was simple and powerful: if the State of Vermont believes we can make these plans a reality, then others do too.

Our Working Lands grants are part of our larger plan to double our branded sales over the next four years, with roughly 20 percent growth per year. We are already seeing those changes take effect. In the fourth quarter of 2025, our branded sales grew 27 percent compared to the same period in 2024. Looking only at November and December, that growth was nearly 50 percent.

About two-thirds of our sales come from customers and businesses outside of Vermont. If we double our branded sales over the next four years, as we are on track to do, we will bring more than five million additional dollars into Vermont from out-of-state customers alone, compared to remaining flat.

That is not a bad return on a fifty-thousand-dollar investment from the State of Vermont.

Those dollars don't stay on a spreadsheet. They circulate. With revenue brought in from outside the state, we are able to turn around and purchase tens of thousands of pounds of ingredients from farms like Honey Field Farm in Norwich, True Love Farm in Shaftsbury, Joneslan Farm in Hyde Park, and West Farm in Jeffersonville. We would be able to grow our staff by 25 percent, from fifteen to twenty full-time, year-round employees, across our kitchen, shipping, and sales departments.

The Working Lands model works because it funds the entire ecosystem, not just one link in the chain. Farmers and manufacturers rise together. Without manufacturers, farms hit a ceiling. Without farms, manufacturers have nothing to build on. Working Lands is the connective tissue that allows both to thrive.

Because we purchase more Vermont-grown chili peppers than anyone else in the country, even more than Whole Foods, we have to commit to our crop purchases in the depths of winter, while farms are still planning their fields. We spread those purchases across our network of small farms so that the success or failure of any single farm does not jeopardize our ability to consistently produce the products our customers expect.

That strategy protects our business, but more importantly, it protects our farms. If one farm has an off year, we are still there to purchase again the next year when they are ready to grow. That consistency matters.

When we commit to large crop purchases, farms can breathe a little easier. Geoff Kleis of Familia Farm in West Pawlet put it best when he said:

“Butterfly Bakery gives us a market we don't have to invent or manage every single day. If I get a flat tire, I'm not missing my one chance to sell that week. Our days are more predictable and our mission is clearer. We can focus on growing fifteen crops really well instead of juggling thirty just to stay competitive at the farmers' market. I can focus on farming instead of marketing.”

Our Working Lands grant did exactly what it was designed to do. We updated our photography. We tried paid advertising for the first time. We attended trade shows. We learned about earned media and how to tell, and sell, our story.

Some of those efforts worked incredibly well. Some of them did not work at all, or not the way we expected. But the grant allowed us to take informed risks. If something didn't pay off, it didn't threaten the survival of the company. That freedom to experiment allowed us to identify

where to invest our own dollars with confidence and has directly contributed to the growth trajectory we are now on.

Without Working Lands support, we would have been limited to making only “sure thing” bets. But when your expertise isn’t sales and marketing, it’s hard to know what a sure thing even looks like. For many food businesses, that path leads to competing on price alone and slowly abandoning local sourcing.

Instead, we learned how to tell our story. We learned how to help customers understand why the farm that grows the chili peppers in their hot sauce matters to them, even if that farm is hundreds or thousands of miles away.

Marketing, when done well, isn’t about discounts or hollow storytelling. It’s not about racing to the bottom on price or chasing short-term attention. At its core, good marketing is about translation. It’s about helping customers understand what makes a product different, why the way it’s made matters, and how their everyday purchasing decisions connect back to real places and real people.

For Vermont-grown products, marketing is the bridge that allows a small farm in a rural town to reach a customer they will never meet in person. It gives Vermont farms and food manufacturers a platform to compete nationally, not by pretending to be bigger or cheaper than everyone else, but by clearly communicating value, integrity, and quality. When marketing is done thoughtfully, it ensures that Vermont-grown ingredients are treated not as commodities, but as something worth seeking out, paying for, and sustaining over the long term.

The Working Lands program allows businesses like mine to plan five or even ten years ahead, instead of operating in constant crisis mode and scrambling for cash every quarter. That long-term perspective changes how we make our decisions. It allows us to invest in people, infrastructure, and relationships rather than chasing short-term fixes or delaying necessary improvements.

That stability ripples outward. It helps keep Vermont lands working by giving farmers the confidence to invest in their fields, their equipment, their people and their soil. When farms have predictable markets, they can focus on building healthy, resilient soil and communities instead of simply surviving to the next season. In turn, businesses like mine are able to grow in a way that is durable, values-aligned, and capable of weathering economic shifts, climate challenges, and market disruptions rather than being undone by them.

Vermont has an opportunity to continue leading the nation in how it supports working lands, not as a nostalgic ideal, but as a modern, resilient economic strategy. Programs like Working Lands prove that relatively small, targeted investments can generate outsized returns in jobs, tax revenue, and rural vitality.

Thank you for continuing to fund this program. Thank you for putting Vermont in a position to lead the way in producing the best food in the country. And thank you for having the foresight to understand that when you invest in farms and the businesses that support them today, you are

bringing millions of dollars back into the state tomorrow and ensuring that Vermont's working lands remain truly working for generations to come.