

Good morning, Chair Durfee and members of the Committee.

For the record, my name is Amber Perry, and I serve as the Administrator and Policy Director at the Vermont Farm Bureau. Thank you for the opportunity to speak today on behalf of our organization and the farmers and producers we represent across the state.

This past growing season has been extremely difficult. The drought we experienced affected nearly every sector of Vermont agriculture. From dairy, livestock, and equine operations to produce growers and hay producers. Many farmers saw pasture growth stop weeks, and in some cases months earlier than expected. Hay yields were cut in half, and water sources ran dangerously low or became obsolete in certain regions. Some farmers were forced to begin feeding their winter hay in late summer just to keep animals healthy, while others faced significantly higher feed and fuel costs that further strained already thin margins.

We also do not yet know what impact this drought will have on maple syrup production. As one of Vermont's signature agricultural industries, any shifts in sap flow or sugar content could have far reaching effects on local economies and rural communities. It will be important to monitor these outcomes closely.

In addition to weather challenges, the federal government shutdown has compounded the difficulties faced by our farmers. Many are unable to reach their local USDA offices, and disaster relief and conservation programs have been delayed. Loan processing came to a halt. For farms already stretched thin by weather-related losses, the loss of timely federal support could not come at a worse time.

Vermont's farmers are resilient; that is something we take great pride in. But resilience has its limits. When the drought intensified and government support systems went silent, farmers were left to carry those burdens alone.

It is also important to recognize the people behind our farms. In Vermont, the average age of a farmer is 57, and approximately 25% of our farmers are 65 or older. As we engage with these farmers for input, outreach, and support, it is essential that we do so in a fair and equitable way. Not all farmers are comfortable using or operating a computer, and outreach efforts must reflect that reality, ensuring that every farmer, regardless of age or technological ability, has equal access to resources, information, and a voice in shaping the future of Vermont agriculture.

We urge the Committee to continue advocating for both federal action and state-level solutions that can provide short-term relief and long-term stability. This includes investments in water infrastructure, drought preparedness, and emergency support programs that keep our farms operating when federal systems are unavailable.

Vermont agriculture remains the backbone of our rural communities and local food systems. With the right support and thoughtful planning, we can meet these challenges together and emerge stronger.

Thank you for your time and for your continued support of Vermont's farmers.

And now, I would like to share some stories from our members.