

Testimony to House Agriculture, Food Resiliency & Forestry Committee

Submitted by Maddie Kempner, NOFA-VT

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Good morning. My name is Maddie Kempner and I'm the policy and organizing director at NOFA-VT. First, thank you Chair Durfee for convening this meeting outside of the regular session, and members of the committee for being here today to hear from all of us about the many intersecting challenges facing Vermont's farming community right now.

I want to keep my remarks brief because there are a lot of us on today's agenda, but I do want to provide some reflections on behalf of NOFA about major challenges facing our community, and in particular, the ongoing drought, the upcoming extreme surge in healthcare costs, and the impacts on farmworkers and Vermont's immigrant communities more broadly.

As you all are aware and some of you are experiencing personally, despite increased rainfall and even some snow in the last couple of weeks, we are still in the midst of a historic drought with six of 14 counties currently facing extreme drought conditions according to the U.S. Drought Monitor.

Coming on the heels of two years of catastrophic flooding, and following an extremely wet spring that delayed planting, the drought conditions this year have already cost farmers an estimated \$13.5 million according to the Agency of Agriculture, Food & Markets' drought impact survey. That number represents millions in lost crops or severely reduced yields, animals - in some cases whole herds - sold, millions of gallons of water hauled and hours and hours of farmers' time spent hauling it. It represents yet another season of farmers pivoting, adapting and "figuring it out" - and another season of economic, physical, and emotional strain for the people producing our food, providing jobs and contributing so much to our state's economy and our communities. There are farmers in the room today who can share their personal experience and the support they need from the state to continue farming as extreme weather conditions persist, and I thank you for taking the time to listen.

I'll also just take a moment to thank you again for passing S.60, the Farm & Forestry Operations Security Special Fund, out of your committee earlier this year. Please continue talking with your colleagues about passing S.60 and providing robust funding for the Farm Security Fund in the upcoming legislative session. The state has a substantial interest in securing our farms' futures, and failure to support their recovery and survival puts Vermont's food security, rural economies, and climate resiliency at risk.

I also want to take a moment to address the significant and disproportionate impact that upcoming changes in healthcare costs are going to have on Vermont's farming community. Access to affordable health care is and has always been critical to farmers' success. As self-employed people, farmers are more likely to rely on the ACA marketplace (Vermont Health Connect) for their health insurance than the average person. Nationally, twenty-seven percent of farmers and ranchers rely on the marketplace for healthcare, more than triple the national average of eight percent of the population. Many, many farmers and farmworkers in our community also rely on Medicaid or Medicare, and will be significantly impacted by changes to those programs in the coming months and years. Lack of access to affordable health care is already a barrier to many people getting into or staying in farming as a career. Talk to almost any farmer in Vermont and you'll quickly learn that hundreds of farm businesses and households are structured largely around access to health care, and that farmers are struggling to keep employees because they can't afford to provide it. These dynamics cause real impacts on a farm's ability to survive or grow, and have major compounding effects on our agricultural economy. We've heard from farmers who are considering leaving the state or the country in order to access affordable care. On a human level, I am deeply concerned about the physical and mental wellbeing of the many farmers who will continue farming here but will be forced to go without health insurance next year when their premiums double or even triple. We all know by now this is nothing short of a crisis in the making. But we also know that there are options for long-term solutions that support everyone. It's time we get serious about them.

Speaking of which, I'm grateful to know that you'll be spending part of the day today hearing from Naomi Wolcott-MacCausland who runs the Migrant Health programs currently based out of UVM Extension, including Bridges to Health. Bridges to Health provides direct healthcare support to over one thousand farmworkers on farms across all 14 counties of Vermont, as well as supporting families in accessing food and other basic needs. It is an essential resource to ensure those working on Vermont's farms, and in dozens of other professions, can access the care they need and deserve. The program is facing serious funding challenges and uncertainty largely as a result of federal policies, and may be forced to end if funding support and a long term home for the program aren't secured. NOFA-VT is requesting, on behalf of the population served by Bridges to Health, and the broader farming community, that this committee support a state appropriation in the FY26 Budget Adjustment Act to ensure their critical work can continue without interruption.

Thank you again for your time today, and for supporting the success and wellbeing of everyone in Vermont's farming community.