



STATE OF VERMONT
HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
HOUSE COMMITTEE ON AGRICULTURE,
FOOD RESILIENCY, AND FORESTRY

Feb. 26, 2025

Dear Chair Scheu,

I am writing on behalf of the House Committee on Agriculture, Food Resiliency, and Forestry (Committee on Agriculture) regarding the FY26 Budget.

The Committee on Agriculture would first like to highlight its deep support for these existing base funding amounts that were **included** in the Governor's budget proposal:

- \$500,000 from the General Fund to fund the Local Purchasing Incentive
- \$500,000 for the Farm to School Program
- \$200,000 for Fairs & Field Days
- \$36.9 million (full statutory funding) for the Vermont Housing & Conservation Board per the governor's recommendation, with sufficient funding for conservation measures

as well as this one-time request that was included in the Governor's budget proposal:

- \$850,000 in B.1100(m)(2) General Fund for the CAFO (Concentrated Animals Feeding Operation) database project and contractor support

The Committee on Agriculture also supports funding requests to the following programs and organizations that were **not included**, or were included at a **different level**, in the Governor's proposal, ranked by committee preference:

- \$500,000 NOFA-VT Crop Cash, Crop Cash Plus and Farm Share programs.
- \$3,000,000 for the Working Lands Initiative (Governor's recommendation is for \$1,000,000, currently in the base).

- \$2,000,000 in new base funding to the Vermont Foodbank for the Vermonters Feeding Vermonters program.
- \$3,000,000 to the Natural Resources Conservation Council (Governor's recommendation is for \$500,000, a reduction of \$112,000 in the current base).
- \$1,750,000 to the Foodbank for Responsive Readiness, and \$1,250,000 for food purchase and distribution
- \$20,000,000 for the Farm & Forestry Operations Security Special Fund

NB: As previously communicated, the Committee on Agriculture does not support repealing Act 64, Universal School Meals.

In addition, the Committee on Agriculture would like to express its support for the following proposals being recommended by other House Standing Committees:

- funding for Serve Learn Earn as recommended by the House Commerce Committee
- funding for the Land Access Opportunity Board as recommended by the General & Housing Committee

The request for \$500,000 in base funding to NOFA-VT includes funding to support the Crop Cash/Crop Plus program, which enables SNAP recipients to shop at farmers markets for fresh local produce, meat and dairy products. The request also supports the Farm Share Program, which provides discounts on CSA shares to low-income Vermonters. This program has demonstrated its *success* in addressing two challenges that Vermont is facing —*food insecurity* and the continued *loss of our farms*. The increased drawdown in federal funding ensures that farmers are paid a fair price for their products and have access to stable markets, *while also* expanding access to locally grown food for Vermonters who, without these programs, could not shop at our farmers markets. *This is a modest request*, with a profoundly positive impact on our communities and our local economy.

Working Lands: The Small Farms Diversification and Transition Program was established as a pilot and funded with \$150,000 in FY24, and implemented through the Working Lands Enterprise program. This granting program addressed historical barriers to funding for our small farms- who continue to go out of business at a startling pace. The Small Farms Grant provided real flexibility for farmers to put that money where *they needed it most*, to make their businesses more viable and sustainable. Because there was *no match requirement*, farmers who had been previously left out of beneficial funding opportunities were able to come to the table with project ideas without being denied for lack of independent capital. Demand far exceeded the availability of funds, with over 170 applications received. Based on the high level of interest, we request and sincerely recommend that this program be funded in FY26 at \$500,000 in base funding, **above**

and beyond the \$1,000,000 in base funding in the governor’s proposal. We also support an additional one-time appropriation of \$1,500,000 for the Working Lands program.

Vermonters Feeding Vermonters: through this program, the Vermont Foodbank has been able to purchase locally grown food *directly from Vermont farmers* and distribute it through their organized and highly streamlined network sites and partner locations. Historically, this body has made measured investments in food security initiatives, but demand has increased post-covid and we now have the opportunity, with this program, to shrink the gap in the number of Vermonters who have access to Vermont grown food.

NRCC: Conservation districts play a critical role in state and federal natural resource management, delivering agricultural conservation work, streambank protection, clean water projects, restoration education, stormwater and invasive species management, and flood resilience efforts. *Last fiscal year the Conservation Districts were awarded \$612,000 base and \$100,000 one time.* We believe it is critical to maintain *at least* this level of funding but would recommend we fulfill the full \$3million request. Vermont's Conservation Districts are exceptional at leveraging other state, federal, and private funds, making them a good return on investment for the state. For every \$1 we have invested in the NRCC base to support ongoing operations at the District level, they have leveraged another \$9 in competitive grant funding to implement projects on the ground.

Responsive Readiness: through Vermont Emergency Management, this funding will ensure that the Foodbank’s warehouses are stocked, the fleet is ready, and that the network has the resources and is ready to help people recover. Shortcomings in distribution and capacity have always been a problem in our rural state—and Responsive Readiness tackles this challenge head on.

Vermont Foodbank: Serves more than 72,000 people each month, distributes close to 15 million pounds of food and supports nearly 300 Vermont farms. The Foodbank plays a critical role in addressing and assessing the needs of our most vulnerable community members. Vermonters are continuing to experience high rates of food insecurity and the demand on food shelves and meal sites, and other distribution points continues to exceed the supply of food available. Investing in the Foodbank takes us one step closer to closing the gaps between *need and availability.*

Farm & Forestry Operations Security Special Fund as recommended by NOFA VT, The Center for and Agricultural Economy, The Connecticut River, The Intervale, The Veg and Berry Association, The Farm Bureau and Rural Vermont: This would be one time funding. We have witnessed multiple times just in the past two years, extreme weather events such as heavy rains and deep freezes can have catastrophic impacts on the agriculture and forestry sectors of the economy. BEGAP and other funding programs have provided some relief but have only covered a fraction of the losses incurred by flooding—and none of the damage caused by heavy freezes. This fund would serve as a more reliable resource to help farmers recover from the impacts of climate disasters and extreme weather.

Finally, the Committee is currently reviewing the following two bills:

- H. 167, an act relating to establishing the Vermonters Feeding Vermonters Grant at the Agency of Agriculture, Food and Markets, includes the \$2 million in funding for the Vermonters feeding Vermonters program noted above
- H. 229, an act relating to establishing the Farm and Forestry Operations Security Special Fund to provide grants for losses to farms and forestry operations due to weather conditions, establishes the fund that would receive the \$20 appropriation noted above (but does not itself include an appropriation).

The Committee recognizes that state revenue is finite, and that federal funds that support critical state services is newly at risk. To that extent that the state funding is unable to cover all of the requests above and noting the impact that the loss of federal money could have on our most vulnerable citizens, we recommend that the budget contingency section ***prioritize food security spending that also supports our agricultural economy.***

The members of the Committee on Agriculture present today voted unanimously to support these recommendations. Please contact me if you need additional information or have questions regarding any of these recommendations.

Rep. David Durfee
Chair
House Committee on Agriculture, Food Resiliency, and Forestry