

Testimony of Denise Smith, Executive Director, VCRD
On behalf of the Working Lands Coalition
February 19, 2025 – Rural Caucus Public Forum

Hello and thank you for holding this forum and for having me in to speak. My name is Denise Smith. I live in St. Albans, VT and I am the Executive Director of the Vermont Council on Rural Development, the backbone organization for the Working Lands Coalition and the Working Lands Partnership.

I am here to request that the Rural Caucus support the Working Lands Coalition's request to *appropriate \$3 million for the Working Lands Enterprise Fund for FY2026*. The Rural Caucus's support of the Working Land Enterprise Initiative has been valuable over the past several years, and we very much appreciate that, and hope that it will continue.

Vermont's Working Lands are a quintessential part of who we are, our identity, and the character of our landscape. These lands are a core value of our identity as Vermonters. The funding we seek helps Vermonters improve their resilience by supporting our agricultural and forestry economies which are necessary for the success of rural Vermont families and communities.

In twelve years, WLEI has directly invested \$18.8 million (a mix of state and federal funding) in 555 farm, food, and forestry projects and leveraged an additional \$30.9 million in matching funds. In 2012, the Vermont Legislature and Governor Shumlin created the Working Lands Enterprise Initiative and Fund (WLEI/WLEF), which was tasked with investing in Vermont's working lands (farm and forest products) enterprises to strengthen our economy, advance job creation, sustain our environment, and keep Vermont beautiful.

We appreciate the \$1 million allocated in the Governor's budget, and we ask you to consider increasing that amount to \$3 million for FY2026. As you may know, the applications continue to far exceed the amount of available funding. According to the VAAFM Impact Report for 2024, applications totaled \$16,187,156, while \$3,150,000 was available.

Grants have been awarded in every single county in Vermont – it is likely that there is a working lands business that benefitted from this program in each of your areas.

The Working Lands Enterprise Grant has been a core funding mechanism for our local economy and has helped Vermonters start, expand, and pivot their businesses so they are able to maintain their existence and contribute to our rural economy. In addition, healthy working lands - our forests and fields - provide our best defense against the extreme weather events we have seen, as they help attenuate and filter our rivers and streams.

Our working lands are a core component of our state's culture, as well as a big part of our resiliency in the face of a changing climate. The people who steward our working lands are important to our state's sustainability as well as our food system security. Our rural economy depends heavily on these businesses, and our rural communities depend on the people who steward our land. I hope you will consider supporting these people and businesses with a total of *\$3 million for the Working Lands Enterprise Fund for FY2026*.

I have included the Working Lands Coalition's handout about our request for your convenience.

Thank you so much for your consideration and for your past support of this important program.