

Public Hearing Testimony re: FY2026 Budget

Submitted by Maddie Kempner, NOFA-VT

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Thank you, members of the appropriations committees, for your important work and for taking the time to hear from members of the public this evening. My name is Maddie Kempner, I'm the policy director at the Northeast Organic Farming Association of Vermont (NOFA) and a resident of Cambridge.

I'm here today to ask you to support \$20,000,000 in the FY2026 budget for farmers to recover after a climate emergency or extreme weather event.

The past two growing seasons, farmers experienced a late spring freeze, unprecedented flooding and other extreme weather that devastated our state's agricultural communities. Flooding destroyed crops and livestock, damaged farm infrastructure, and in some cases washed away entire livelihoods. Many farms lost an entire season of planned revenue, and our state's farmers have now collectively endured tens of millions of dollars in damage and loss over the past two years.

NOFA has had our own Farmer Emergency Fund in place since 1997. Since that time, and especially in the past two years, we've learned a lot about what farmers go through when a flood or other weather emergency happens. The state collectively has learned a lot. We know that federal programs like crop insurance are not designed for or accessible to many of our farmers here in Vermont. The Agency of Agriculture's survey following the flooding in 2023 found that 70% of respondents were not covered by crop insurance. In 2024 that number was still at 57%. And it's not for lack of trying - most of the current federal programs and systems for farm disaster aid involve complex, administratively burdensome application processes and in the end, often provide too little meaningful relief to make the hassle worthwhile. All of this further taxes a farmer's mental health in a time of acute crisis.

Many of our farms cannot afford to weather impacts like the ones we've seen the past two years again and again. The state has a substantial interest in securing our farms' futures, and failure to support their recovery puts Vermont's food security, rural economies, and climate resiliency at risk.

Our farmers aren't just growing food – they're stewarding the land that makes Vermont what it is. Farms are the heart of our culture and community in Vermont, and we know we can do better to help them rebound when emergencies happen.

Again, please include \$20,000,000 for farmers to recover after a climate emergency or extreme weather event in the FY2026 budget. Thank you.