

Testimony for the Legislative Public Hearing on the Governor's FY27 Budget  
Delivered by: Denise Beliveau Smith

Dear Members of House and Senate Appropriations Committee:

Thank you for taking the time to hear our requests for financial investments in Vermont and the people of Vermont. My name is Denise Smith, I am the Executive Director of the Vermont Council on Rural Development, my organization is in service to rural communities and people. I am here on account of being engaged in rural development initiatives for over 30 years. Today, I am here representing two investments for this body to consider.

**The first is a request for further investment in our working lands of \$5 million, and the second is to continue to invest in our rural communities by supporting rural technical assistance capacity of \$500,000.**

Forestry and agriculture are the foundation of the Vermont economy, and while we have funding to support the working lands enterprise initiative, we see a need to increase investment in that program as it is necessary to continue to grow and foster the backbone of our economy in rural Vermont. The Working Lands in Vermont support our clean water and air, provide jobs in rural areas, provide outdoor recreation and the views we cherish that support our mental and physical health, are the foundation of our food system, and give us our maple economy. Investments in the Working Lands Enterprise Initiative administered by the Agency of Agriculture go directly to businesses working the land to keep it productive. This program is currently funded at \$1,000,000. We are requesting an increase in base funding of \$500,000 with an additional \$3.5 million in one-time funding this year.

I am also here on account of requesting one-time funding to support rural technical assistance to communities. This past year I served on a Steering Committee for the Vermont Evaluation of Rural Technical Assistance that researched how the state and partners delivered technical assistance to rural communities. We worked with UVM to gather the data and the feedback was clear, rural towns are asking for: coordinated and simplified access to information and navigation, flexible and patient funding, and support across all phases of project development. They also need Vermont's technical assistance providers to be well coordinated and adequately resourced to work together in service of locally defined priorities. This small one-time FY27 appropriation we are requesting would allow the State and its partners to respond directly to town needs.

Investment in both the Working Lands Enterprise Initiative at \$5 million dollars and Technical Assistance to Rural Town at \$500,000 is good for Vermont and supports enterprises that make up our rural Vermont economy and the communities they are part of. Thank you for your attention and consideration.