

**Testimony of Amy Shollenberger, representing the Working Lands Coalition
House Commerce & Economic Development Committee**

February 26, 2025

RE: Please support \$3million in funding for the Working Lands Enterprise Initiative

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today and for your consideration of this important budget request. I am here on behalf of the Working Lands Coalition, which is spearheaded by the Vermont Council on Rural Development. The member organizations are all listed on the handout I have submitted. **The Working Lands Coalition would like to ask for your support of a \$3 million appropriation for the Working Lands Enterprise Fund for FY2026.** Governor Scott has level-funded the Working Lands program at \$1 million for FY2026 in his proposed budget. Your committee's support will help to show the importance of this appropriation for our working lands farm and forest products businesses.

I am so glad to be here today to talk about this program, and I am proud that I have been involved in supporting the Working Lands Enterprise Initiative since the beginning, through work with the Working Lands Coalition. The program was started with a bill that was signed into law by Governor Shumlin on March 15, 2012, so we are coming up on the 13th anniversary of this bill. I have worked on many bills over the years, and this is one that is so exciting because I get to see the results and the impact on a regular basis. Your committee has played a big role in the success of the original bill and the support of the program over the past 13 years, and for that, we thank you. I believe Chair Marcotte is the only member remaining on this committee from that time, but I would mention that Senator Bill Carris was on the Senate Economic Development Committee at that time, and I know you have ties to him here now.

The goals of the Working Lands Enterprise Initiative were always to keep our land open and productive and also to:

- create jobs in working lands enterprises,
- keep young entrepreneurs in Vermont,
- build new markets for value-added products,
- increase capacity for in-state production and
- leverage more investment for growing enterprises.

The program has delivered on these goals, year over year. On the handout I submitted, a few key statistics are highlighted – these statistics are pulled from the VAAF^M's Working Lands Impact Report, which they submit every year. I have provided a copy of this year's report with my testimony.

One thing I wanted to highlight for you as the Commerce & Economic Development Committee is the key role these relatively small grants can make for working lands businesses. I have included here a graphic of the “capital continuum” that was created by the Vermont Sustainable Jobs Fund.

I remember the first time I saw this graphic and learned how important this kind of state investment can be for a business that is trying to level up. As you can see it is on the “high risk/high reward” end of the continuum. Many times a small grant from the State can show confidence in a business plan – and the Working Lands Enterprise Board has developed a strong reputation of credible review of the applications submitted to them. A grant from this program can leverage angel investment or provide funds needed to secure a large loan, and that can be the difference between a business being able to take the next step in growth or having to struggle along wherever they are. There are so many stories of farm and forest products businesses that were able to grow because of a Working Lands grant. I've included a slide deck with just some of the stories – there are more featured in the Impact Report also. The slide deck are stories we collected for the 10th anniversary celebration a few years ago.



Every county in our State has seen the benefits of the Working Lands Enterprise Initiative. This statewide focus was part of the original intent of the bill and was much discussed during the committee process. Also, the design of the Working Lands Enterprise Board was very important to ensure that *all* working lands businesses would be considered seriously. You can see the current board members and the positions that are listed in the statute (next to each board member's name) here: <https://workinglands.vermont.gov/board-staff>. You will see the board is a mix of Agency and Department representatives from VAAFM, ACCD and FPR, as well as people with a variety of expertise and experience related to working lands enterprises, business, conservation & economic development.

This board and the collaboration among its members has been incredibly valuable. VAAFM, ACCD & FPR have been fully invested from the beginning, and the many board members over the past 13 years have made significant contributions with their insights, knowledge and recommendations – not to mention the invaluable feedback they offer to the folks who apply for the grants.

I hope your committee will support the Working Lands Coalition's request to appropriate \$3 million for the Working Lands Enterprise Fund in FY2026. You can be assured the money will be well spent supporting our farm and forest products businesses across the state, which in turn keeps our land open and in production, supports our local and state economies, and keeps the heart of Vermont beating strong.

Thank you for your consideration of this request.