

Testimony of Bob Chapelle

House Commerce & Economic Development Committee

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I am Bob Chapelle. I am a potato farmer in Williamstown VT. We have traditionally grown 50-60 acres of potatoes, but my wife and I are becoming part of that geriatric population. Now we are scaling back, growing closer to 25 acres. At our height we were producing in excess of 1.5 million pounds, but now we are down 600-700k.

We have been farming for a little over 50 years, and I am one of the Vermonters feeding Vermonters. It's been a pleasure working with VT Foodbank. If you don't already know, they have an extremely professional operation. If there is a problem, like I cannot get my truck off the loading dock because there was freezing rain the night before, there's a person to call and we can rearrange.

The real advantage for us as a farmer, is the forward contracting. We can literally put a crop in the spring and hope for the best, hope for good weather, hope the help shows up, and then that results in a good crop if those things happen. Then you hope for decent prices. It's a little the case with dairy farming and other farming. There is a sense of the last farmer standing. I can weather this, and other people will drop out and things will get better.

That's not exactly the way it works. Dairy farmers are looking down a rough road. They kind of know what is ahead of them. They know the price of milk so they can make informed decisions. In the produce industry, we really don't know. In the past year, we had a drought, the worst we had in 50 years. We had a crop failure, 20 percent of what we expected. We had to make some tough decisions and are meeting with VEDA and our leaders to hopefully get back to the starting line.

My background did not start as a farmer. I started off as an engineer with a strong background in math. I actually taught math for 14 years. I understand probability and I will tell you, I have never been tempted to buy a lottery ticket in my life, but I gamble for a living. I went in not knowing what I was getting into. I am very happy farming, and I hope to die with my boots on - I want to keep going.

The Foodbank contracting is very important to our farm. In a good year it represents 1/3 of what our gross income would be. It's also better to pack in large quantities and make one big delivery rather than going to the border to do Hannafords orders twice a week. We have always liked working with Hannafords, we have 11 stores and almost had 20 stores when Grand Union was here.

This year I did not have enough potatoes to fill the contract with the Foodbank. From our point of view there's money left on the table, from their point of view, there are less potatoes in the market. That is all we have done. I have notified Hannafords and wholesale dealers that I just didn't have potatoes and we weren't able to do any business this year.

The idea of Vermonters Feeding Vermonters, this money goes back into our farm, and the farm economy. It's spread throughout the state throughout the year. We pay our employees, and they spend their money in state.

What I used to send to the Foodbank, we would donate it, not directly to a food bank but another operation, were the number two potatoes. They are still totally edible, just more peeling involved. Generally, we get half the value or less for the potato compared to number 1. Until Vermonters Feeding Vermonters came into existence, a lot of our neighbors would go down to a convenience store and pick up a 50lb bag of unclassified potatoes, which means they are not number 1's. They could find a 50lb bag for 8 or 9 dollars. Now I feel good that some of our products with our name on it are getting into the hands of people who haven't had them before.