

Submitted by Rep. Michelle Bos-Lun, Windham-3

H 167, the *Vermonters Feeding Vermonters* supports a critical program that the Vermont Food Bank started in 2018. The program provides food insecure Vermonters with access to local farm products while providing a steady market for Vermont farmers.

The Vermont Food Bank established this program in response to produce and proteins being the items most requested by community partner food distribution organizations. Rather than investing Vermont dollars in fruit from Florida or potatoes from Maine, this program designates funding to support local Vermont products from squash and root vegetables to apples and berries. The program also provides access to Vermont raised meat, dairy & eggs.

The *Vermonters Feeding Vermonters* program empowers the Vermont Food Bank in partnership with the Department of Agriculture and Markets to contract with Vermont farm producers to make their products available to people who otherwise would have limited or no access to these products. 299 Vermont farms were supported in this program in 2024.

*Vermonters Feeding Vermonters* aligns with long term goals for farm and food stability in Vermont including the Vermont Food Security Roadmap to 2035\*, and also the Vermont Agriculture & Food System Strategic Plan to 2030\*

The program was expanded during the pandemic with a mix of state and private philanthropic funds, contracting for 2.4 million dollars worth of farm products from Vermont Farms in 2023, and 2.38 million dollars in 2024.

A majority of the Vermont farm products purchased with this program go to local food pantries, others to organizations who use the funds to purchase CSA shares or to purchase directly from farms.

- Large-Scale Wholesale Purchasing 73% (\$1.74 million in FY24)
- Mini Grants to Vermont Foodbank partners 27% (\$500,000, 21%) and Farm Share CSAs (\$140,000, 6%) 27%
- In 2024 the VT Food Bank distributed more than 1.4 million pounds of local food in Vermont.
- Food went out to 300+ Vermont Foodbank network and community partners across the state in 2024,

Food insecurity has been increasing in recent years, making programs like this especially needed. 2022 figures from *Feeding America*, a national food security study, found that our food insecure population in Vermont was 11.7% of our population: 75,410 people. During the pandemic our ability to meet the needs of food insecure Vermonters went up with the help of federal funding, but food insecurity is increasing again as these pandemic support programs have come to an end & with changes in federal funding.

In my community, the Putney Foodshelf, a community partner in the *Vermonters Feeding Vermonters* program, told me they have experienced a "250% increase in the number of households they serve since 2020. Just since 2022 the increase is 158%".

Among people who are food insecure  
57% are above SNAP threshold (SNAP is the program once known as food stamps)  
43% are below SNAP threshold.

For people with limited financial resources, individuals are faced with difficult choices: should they pay the rent or electric bill, pay the co-pay on their prescriptions or medical appointments or buy fresh meat and produce? *Vermonters Feeding Vermonters* helps Vermonters to have their food needs met when facing these hard choices.

Numerous food programs have been cut on the federal level recently: over 1 billion in USDA cuts were announced impacting both farmers and students through eliminating local purchasing priorities for school lunches among other programs. Supporting our existing Vermont programs is critical for both food insecure individuals and our Vermont farmers.

Without the funds requested from the General Fund for this project the Vermont Food Bank will have to severely cut back this program.

With so many farms struggling to survive in today's market, the funds from these contracts are of extraordinary benefit to sustaining Vermont agriculture and without them we may lose more local farms.

Between 2012 and 2023, nearly half of Vermont's small dairy farms closed down.

In total Vermont currently has 6,537 farms, we had 7,338 farms in 2012, a loss of over 800 farms.

This bill as originally intended would continue the program with 2 million dollars from the General Fund. This would benefit Vermont consumers and provide reliable income for participating Vermont farms.

Here are a couple of quotes from farmers who had contracts through this program:

- “This is so helpful to us and our small farm stand. By supporting us and encouraging your clients to access healthier food items you’re making the community better for all of us. We hope to continue working with you every year and support the mission of this grant.”
- “I have loved working with [Vermont Foodbank network partner] Neighbors in Action! They have amazing volunteers and staff who really care about their community and providing fresh, quality food for those who are struggling to meet needs. Having been a part of this grant program for several years now, it has really helped support my bottom line by giving me flexibility in what I choose to bring, reducing waste on the farm and helping support our mission of serving our community.”

From the Vermont Foodbank’s annual survey of larger-scale producers 100% of participating growers reported increased stability related to selling large, reliable quantities and increased sales goals. It enabled farmers to hire more workers, to invest in equipment and other steps that make farming more sustainable.

With the federal funding to support farmers and food banks cut severely recently, this bill will help to continue to support our farmers and food insecure individuals in important ways.

