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Thank you for your attention. My name is Aprille Soons Palmer and I live in South Hero. I am the manager of the Champlain Islands Farmers Markets and I am also on the board of the Vermont Farmers Market Association. In both capacities, I work closely with NOFA-VT and can attest that their work is essential for sustaining thriving farmers and healthy communities.

I am here today to support NOFA-VT's request for \$500,000 in base funding to Strengthen Vermont Farm Viability and Address Food Security by sustaining two proven programs: Crop Cash (Plus) and Farm Share.

I manage two weekly farmers markets throughout the growing season in South Hero and Grand Isle. Every market, we have a number of customers who come to my table to utilize their SNAP/EBT cards. The Crop Cash program allows them to match their first \$20 in benefits with Crop Cash coupons to spend on local fresh fruits and vegetables from our farmers. These coupons go a long way to stretch the tight budgets of those families who are most in need of food assistance. They also allow our hardworking farmers to be paid a fair price for the literal fruits of their labor.

The Crop Cash program encourages our SNAP customers to shop locally at the farmers market and increases accessibility to fresh, nutritious food from our Vermont farmers and producers. In 2023, the Crop Cash (Plus) pilot program allowed customers to access not only fresh produce with their coupons, but also essential proteins like eggs and meat. Customers were also able to purchase shelf stable staples like home canned goods, pasta, bread, honey, and maple from our farmers. This variety was hugely appreciated by our customers and led to increased sales overall for many of our vendors.

These essential Vermont products should not be considered luxuries. According to our monthly customer counts, even during the busiest tourist season in the Champlain Islands, Vermonters still accounted for over 60% of traffic to the market. Vermont communities rely on farmers markets not only for their groceries, but for engagement with their community. Connecting with a farmer face to face, tasting a fresh carrot or a juicy organic heirloom tomato grown right down the road, learning about how their meat was raised - all of these connections to our food system are essential.

One of our market regulars - a 3SquaresVT customer - asks every time I see her if Crop Cash Plus will be returning. "Fingers crossed for next year," is what I tell her. She is a resourceful and strong Vermonter - she grows a lot of vegetables in her own garden, enough to can and store for the winter. The ability to purchase meat with Crop Cash Plus in 2023 was an incredible benefit for her and her family. She hardly ever missed a

market that year, because she depended on that extra benefit to support her grocery budget and purchase local meat from our farmers.

As grocery prices rise across the board and food benefits dwindle, low income families struggle to put food on the table more than ever. Crop Cash Plus at Vermont farmers markets offers an important, targeted opportunity to connect families and folks most in need to locally farmed food. Farmers markets and fresh food are for everyone and Crop Cash helps make farmers markets more accessible. These benefits are also crucial to strengthening our Vermont economy by encouraging folks to spend their dollars locally.

To reiterate, I am here to support NOFA-VT's request for \$500,000 in base funding to Strengthen Vermont Farm Viability and Address Food Security by sustaining two proven programs: Crop Cash (Plus) and Farm Share.

Thank you for your time.