

Farm to School Awareness Day Testimony - February 12, 2025

Good morning, honorable committee members. Thank you for the opportunity to testify today. My name is Becca Perrin, and I am the Food Hub Account Manager for Green Mountain Farm Direct, the local food hub operated by Green Mountain Farm to School. Based in Newport, Vermont, our mission is to connect schools, institutions, and retailers with fresh, locally grown food while supporting Vermont's farmers and producers.

I am here today to ask for your continued support for the Farm to School & Early Childhood program and the Local Food Incentive, with a level-funded base appropriation of \$500,000 each for FY2026. These programs are not just investments in Vermont's 83,000 students—they are critical to farm viability, providing stable markets, increasing farm income, and strengthening our agricultural economy.

Green Mountain Farm Direct partners with over 50 Vermont farmers and producers, many of whom are small-scale operations that depend on local markets. We source, market and sell a wide range of products—from produce and dairy to meat, maple syrup, and value-added goods—to 118 schools across Northern and Central Vermont. By aggregating and distributing these products, we help farmers access markets that might otherwise be out of reach.

The Local Food Incentive has had a significant positive impact on Vermont's agricultural economy. According to the Agency of Education's 2025 Legislative Report on the Local Foods Incentive Program, every dollar of grant funding results in over 3 dollars of local purchasing. This means that the \$384,818 spent by the program in FY2025 resulted in nearly \$1.3 million invested in the Vermont food economy. These dollars go directly to Vermont farmers, helping them sustain and grow their operations.

Since the LFI was introduced in 2021, Farm Direct's school sales have steadily increased, providing producers with a reliable, year-round market. For example, Sweet Rowen Farmstead in West Glover has seen their sales to schools through Farm Direct increase five-fold since the Local Food Incentive was introduced. As farmer Paul Lisai puts it, *"The goal of our farm has always been to produce food for people that live here, so if we can get our stuff in schools, that meets a lot of our goals."*

The impact of the program extends beyond individual farms. In the Northeast Kingdom, where many schools are small and rural, the incentive has empowered districts like Orleans Southwest Supervisory Union to invest in local purchasing. This has enabled them to source bushels of apples from Hall's Orchard in Isle La Motte, buttermilk from Butterworks Farm in Westfield, and locally grown and stoneground flour from Morningstar Farm in Glover. In FY2025, Orleans SW reached 17% local purchasing and qualified for the grant—demonstrating the program's power to drive institutional demand for Vermont-grown food.

These programs are not just about food—they are about building a resilient agricultural economy. Vermont's farmers face numerous challenges, from rising input costs to climate change and market volatility. Small and mid-sized farms—the backbone of Vermont agriculture—depend on these stable markets to plan for the future, retain employees, and invest in sustainable practices.

When we support schools in purchasing local food, we are investing in communities. Every dollar spent on local products circulates through the local economy, supporting not only farmers but also processors, distributors, and food system workers. This economic multiplier effect is especially significant in rural regions where farms are family-owned and deeply tied to the local economy.

Vermont is a national leader in Farm to School programming, and these programs are a big reason why. They strengthen our local food system, support our agricultural communities, and ensure that our children have access to healthy, locally sourced meals. As we face ongoing challenges like a changing climate, supply chain disruptions, and food insecurity, these programs are more important than ever.

I urge you to support the Farm to School & Early Childhood program with a level-funded base appropriation of \$500,000 for Fiscal Year 2026. I also urge you to support the Local Food Incentive program for schools at \$500,000 level funding base appropriation. These programs are essential to building a resilient, sustainable food system that benefits all Vermonters. Thank you for your time and consideration. I am happy to answer any questions you may have.