

Johanna Doren

Local Food Access Director, NOFA-VT

Johanna@nofavt.org

April 4, 2025

Testimony to Senate Committee on Agriculture re: NOFA-VT Local Food Security FY26 Budget Request

Thank you, Chair Ingalls and committee for inviting us to come talk with you today. For the record, my name is Johanna Doren and I am the Local Food Access Director at NOFA-VT.

I want to share an update on 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. The House passed their FY26 budget last week, which included \$300,000 in one-time funding for NOFA's food security programs. We are grateful for the House's support, and of course we will use every dollar we get, but \$500,000 is what we need to maintain the Farm Share and Crop Cash programs at the current level of demand, *as well as* bring back the Crop Cash Plus expansion we piloted in 2023. Without sufficient state funding, the Crop Cash Plus expansion does not exist. We hope you'll bring your support for NOFA-VT's budget request of \$500,000 in base funding to the Senate Appropriations Committee.

I want to share a bit more about the need for this funding and, in particular, the importance of the Crop Cash Plus expansion. You will then hear from two farmers, a farmers market manager, and Crop Cash customer about the impact of these programs.

You may remember from some testimony during SNAP Awareness Day, that the Crop Cash and Farm Share Programs provide financial assistance to low-income Vermonters to buy fresh food from their local farmers. These long-standing statewide programs are truly a win-win. With every dollar invested, low-income Vermonters can purchase more healthy, fresh, local food that they could not purchase otherwise, and Vermont farmers receive a reliable, fair price for their products.

Crop Cash doubles 3SquaresVT (SNAP) benefits, dollar for dollar, for fruits and vegetables purchased at over 40 Vermont farmers markets. When a 3SVT customer uses their food benefits at a participating farmers market, they can get a matching dollar amount of Crop Cash coupons to spend on fruits, vegetables, herbs, and plant seeds and starts at the market. In other words, by spending \$1 of federal food benefits, participants would have \$2 to spend on local food. This beloved program is federally funded, but a local match is required in order to draw down the federal funds. For each \$100,000 in federal funding, NOFA-VT needs to provide \$60,000 in local match towards Crop Cash dollars. We are asking for this amount in the state budget so that we can maintain our current programmatic impact. **If we do not secure this match via state funding, we will need to reduce our drawdown of federal funding, as well as dropping our capacity to administer the program.**

Crop Cash Plus was a 2023 pilot funded by a one-time appropriation in the FY23 state budget. It expanded Crop Cash to all SNAP-eligible foods, since federal funding for Crop Cash is restricted just to fruits and vegetables. This extended the program's impact to most agricultural products sold at farmers markets, like eggs, meat, cheese, bread, and further expanded local food access for 3SVT recipients. With

the addition of the Crop Cash Plus pilot, by spending \$1 of food benefits, 3SVT participants would have \$3 to spend on local food (and \$2 of those \$3 are federally funded!). We received overwhelmingly positive feedback from customers, who could use this extra money to finally afford the protein-rich food like eggs, pork, and beef, that they couldn't afford otherwise. We also heard from meat, dairy, and other livestock producers that 10%, and sometimes 20%, of their farmers market income came from these coupons, an incredible boost to their bottom line. **NOFA-VT's requested appropriation includes at least \$200,000 of state dollars towards the continuation of the Crop Cash Plus Program, which will not continue otherwise.**

As you'll hear, these programs are not only critical to food security, but provide meaningful sources of revenue for Vermont farmers. Farm viability is more than economics. Farmers are integral to their communities, the health of the land, and our collective food security. **By directly connecting limited income Vermonters with their local farmers, these programs actively work to strengthen community investment in both viable farms and food security.**

We are asking for \$500,000 in base funding in FY26 so that we can continue to meet the increasing demand for these food security programs, continue to draw down federal and philanthropic funds, and fill the funding gap for the Crop Cash Plus expansion. Crop Cash (Plus) and Farm Share are proven programs that help Vermont achieve food security and farm viability, providing vital income to farmers and making local food more affordable for Vermonters. We hope you'll bring your support for NOFA-VT's budget request of \$500,000 in base funding to the Senate Appropriations Committee. Thank you for your time and consideration.

I am going to share a video testimony from Ashley Strobridge, from Montpelier, who was not able to join in person today but wanted to share her story.