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April 4, 2025

Senate Agriculture Committee

Good morning, and thank you for taking the time to hear my testimony today. My name is Kayleigh Boucher, and I represent Green Mountain Blue Cheese. 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 (and Crop Cash Plus), and Farm Share.

I am a cheesemaker and will soon be taking over the family business. We produce artisan blue cheese with milk from my family's dairy farm in Highgate, Vermont. My family has been dairy farming for many generations and we have deep roots in Vermont's agricultural community.

Twenty-five years ago, when my aunt and uncle began making blue cheese, the Burlington Farmers' Market played a pivotal role in helping them grow the business. They gained a loyal local following. Unfortunately, we paused cheese production during Covid, but we returned as a vendor at the Burlington Farmers' Market in 2023, and it was incredible to see the positive impact of Crop Cash and Crop Cash Plus.

We see a lot of tourists and out-of-state visitors at the market. I'm often asked if a piece of my cheese will survive a plane ride! While I love engaging with people who want to take a piece of Vermont's rich agriculture home, our local regulars are the ones who sustain our business. They are the ones who show up on the windy, rainy, or snowy days to support us. The Crop Cash and Crop Cash Plus programs are invaluable because they create new local regulars for vendors like me.

I sell three types of blue cheese, eggs from my backyard chickens, and beef and pork raised on our farm. My business can only accept Crop Cash Plus. There are many other farm vendors at the market in the same position. As a vendor, Crop Cash Plus provided an extra revenue stream, and more importantly, it allowed Green Mountain Blue Cheese to reach people who otherwise could not afford our products. Unfortunately, the rising costs of producing sustainable, high-quality food can price out some of our local customers.

In 2024, NOFA received a one-time state appropriation of \$300,000, which was not enough funding to run Crop Cash Plus again. While Crop Cash is an incredible and impactful initiative, it has limitations—it can only be used to purchase fruits, vegetables, herbs, and plant starts. Unfortunately, staple foods like eggs, meat, cheese, milk, and bread cannot be purchased with Crop Cash, which leaves many customers' needs unmet, especially at the Winter markets when much less seasonal produce is available.

At the Burlington Farmers Market, in 2023, when both Crop Cash and Crop Cash Plus were available, about \$40,000 in those coupons was spent through the program. In contrast, in 2024, with only Crop Cash available, only \$12,000 in coupons was spent at Burlington Market. This demonstrates the immense impact that the Crop Cash Plus program has in supporting both vendors and local customers in Burlington.

I frequently have customers ask if I accept Crop Cash and having to turn them away is disheartening. It is my understanding that the House recently voted on their budget and included \$300,000 for these programs, which does not include Crop Cash Plus. I am here today to ask the committee to support the full \$500,000 budget NOFA-VT is requesting so that we can bring back Crop Cash Plus. This funding will significantly broaden and deepen the impact of these programs, supporting small farms like mine and ensuring that our high-quality food reaches those who need them most in our community.

Thank you for your time and for considering the importance of these programs.