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Hayley Williams

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Center for an Agricultural Economy

Hardwick, Vermont

Hello,

My name is Hayley Williams and I live in Craftsbury. This is my second year testifying at the state house. I really appreciate the opportunity to do so - Thank you!

I am the Local Food Coordinator at the Center for an Agricultural Economy, a nonprofit based in Hardwick. I'm here to ask you 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.

The CAE does work in nearly every part of the agricultural sector including farm & food business advising, food processing, aggregation, distribution and work around food access initiatives. My role at CAE includes managing the Hardwick Farmers Market and 2024 was my third season doing so. I am currently a member of the Vermont Farmers Market Association board, which means that I regularly hear of the troubles (and successes!) of our state's farmers markets. What I hope to emphasize today is that many markets in Vermont experienced a significant drop in sales between the 2023 and 2024 seasons, but that was not the case for Hardwick and I want to share why:

In 2023, Crop Cash PLUS expanded the purchasing power of EBT benefits to include foods other than fruits, veggies, and herbs. Customers were able to purchase meat, maple, bread, jams and other food items. Due to lack of funding, that program was discontinued in 2024 and as I previously mentioned, nearly all markets around the state experienced a significant dip in attendance and subsequently, a loss of sales for their ag vendors.

This past year, the CAE generously supported the Hardwick Farmers Market with funding to create our own version of Crop Cash PLUS which we called HFM BUCKS. These \$5 vouchers were distributed to customers who chose to spend their food benefits at our market.

In 2022, our market did just under \$70K in sales. In 2023, that number jumped to \$95K (largely due to Crop Cash PLUS.) In 2024, we grossed over \$108K (this time thanks to market bucks.) Funding for Crop Cash PLUS (or HFM bucks) not only expands the purchasing power of EBT, it also directly benefits our farmers with increased sales at farmers markets across the state. Farmers Markets in Vermont provide multiple benefits for the community; Markets are often the first place where new and beginning farmers sell products as they establish their business and customer base. It is vital that Crop Cash Plus is supported on a statewide level, so that *all* SNAP participants and farmers market vendors can benefit.

Farmers Markets also foster community connections through food, celebration and regular gathering. I hope this example helps demonstrate the importance of both farmers markets in Vermont and initiatives

like Crop Cash PLUS so that they can continue to support both Vermont's Agricultural sector and our neighbors who rely on these critical programs to feed their families. So, please 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, and I am happy to answer any questions.