

Stoni Tomson
New Tradition Farm
3SquaresVT Awareness Day
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Senate Committee on Agriculture

Good morning and thank you for hearing my perspective today. My name is Stoni Tomson, and I am a vegetable, fruit and nut grower on a total of 5.5 acres of leased land in Huntington. I urge you to fund \$500,000 for Crop Cash, Crop Cash Plus and the NOFA VT Farm share program as a proven, commonsense, win-win way to support both farmers and families in Vermont.

Up to now, my farm, New Tradition Farm, has sold produce to customers at the Richmond Farmers Market, the Burlington Farmers Market, a CSA, the Williston Food Shelf, a farmstand run by my landlord, as well as to several other small wholesale accounts. So far, I have employed at most one other person. I am proud to say that 2025 will be New Tradition Farm's 5th season in production. I say that "I am proud" because to say that it hasn't been easy to make it to this point in building an economically and ecologically viable farm business would be an egregious understatement. To be blunt, there have been seasons where I stayed in business by the skin of my teeth. The Crop Cash program and NOFA's Farm Share Program have been essential sources of income for my farm during these startup years, and I know that these programs have been equally essential sources of food for my customers who enroll in them.

I became a farmer because I am passionate about feeding my neighbors and stewarding the earth in an ecologically responsible way. I believe that we all deserve fresh, healthy food that nourishes us, and I know for a fact that we can grow such food in a way that protects and even enhances the vitality of the ecosystem that we are enmeshed in. I also come from a long line of small business owners whose relentless grit, hustle, and community-mindedness strengthened their local economies and wove a strong and resilient social fabric. I started my farm with the desire to carry forward that tradition of honest work, community-mindedness, and mutual flourishing.

However, it didn't take me long to realize that if I wanted to stay in business as a farmer who prioritizes long term soil health and ecological well-being as well as a fair wage for my employee, I would have to charge prices that some of my neighbors cannot easily afford, especially at a time when so many of us are already struggling to make ends meet with housing costs, healthcare costs, student debt, and the widespread inflation we've experienced over the last several years.

This is a disheartening realization, because at a time when we are facing various ecological crises and losing enormous amounts of topsoil to erosion and development nationwide, to neglect soil health and ecological well-being in the name of cost cutting is akin to robbing future generations of abundance and health. Yet if our neighbors can't afford our vegetables, we are in effect excluding them from that same abundance and health in the here and now. As I stated before, I became a farmer to steward the earth and feed my neighbors, not to sell a luxury good to only the most fortunate among us.

The Crop Cash Programs and the Farm Share Programs offer a win-win solution to this conundrum. In the case of Crop Cash, eaters see their EBT/SNAP money doubled and are able to enjoy top-quality, fresh, local vegetables, and farmers like me gain a whole new set of customers who otherwise likely would not be customers or would buy far less. During the 2022 and 2023 seasons in particular, when there was more funding for Crop Cash, I gained many new customers who were shopping at the farmers market for the first time. In the 2024 season, Crop Cash accounted for nearly 10% of my gross income. There have been days at the farmers markets when Crop Cash accounted for nearly 25% of gross income. In a business where the margins are razor thin and cashflow is often a source of stress, this revenue is a lifeline.

The Farm Share Program has similarly been a boon to both my business and my customers. My customers receive a season's worth of vegetables for 25-75% of the normal price, and I receive payment at a critical time in the spring when I'm buying the tools and supplies I need—a win-win scenario for all. There is so much demand for this program, in fact, that NOFA ran out of funding in early February last year, and my customers were not able to receive funding via this program.

A strong agricultural economy has given Vermont its culture of resilience and neighborliness. At a time when there is much tearing neighbors apart, good food from local farms and farmers markets bring us together. For all these reasons I urge 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.

Thank you for hearing my perspective, and I am happy to address any questions.