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Good morning to the members of the Senate Agriculture Committee and thank you so much for having us here today to speak about the Crop Cash Plus program and its impact on farmers like us. My name is Vanessa Rose, and I co-own Leaping Bear Farm in Putney, VT with my partner Justin Bramhall. Before we get started we want to take a moment to express our heartfelt appreciation for the invaluable support provided by the Crop Cash Plus program, and for the Committee's time today to hear about the truly positive impact of that initiative for everyone involved.

We're here today to advocate for the request of \$500,000 in base funding to strengthen Vermont farm viability and address food security by sustaining these two proven programs: Crop Cash (Plus) and Farm Share.

As I mentioned earlier, we own Leaping Bear Farm, a Certified Real Organic, pasture raised poultry and sheep operation in Putney, Vermont. We also grow organic microgreens year-round. My incredibly hard working partner Justin and I are beginning our 7th growing season in April and we are *immensely* proud of the work we do. We use regenerative farming techniques that not only raise incredibly wholesome and nourishing chicken for our community, but actually sequester meaningful amounts of carbon in our soils, helping to make them more resilient to the increased flooding and droughts our changing climate is experiencing here in Vermont. This work is very hard but more so, it is meaningful and necessary. Farmers have a hard time getting away from their work, we only have so many hours in the day to make sure we all get fed, but we've made it a priority to be here today to represent not only our voice but the voices of countless other Vermont farmers and ranchers. We have spoken to many of our colleagues in Ag and there is resounding support for the continuation of this incredibly impactful program. From our farm's perspective the Crop Cash Plus program was *wildly* successful.

We believe strongly in funding for food access and want to tell you a quick personal story about why we fight for it. On our farm, we try hard to minimize waste, so we learned to make homemade bone broth out of the frames we produce when our chickens are parted. We have had so much positive feedback about our broth, from people raving about the taste to customers with severe health issues that insist our broth helps them with their ailments. These customers are sometimes low income and struggle with access to wholesome food, and we see that food access funding makes a huge difference in their quality of life and overall health. We produce Certified Real Organic, Pasture Raised chicken products that are the highest quality poultry and eggs available on the market and it's vital that healthy, wholesome foods like these remain accessible to all Vermonters regardless of income.

A 2019 study conducted by researchers from [Brigham and Women's Hospital](#) linked poor diets to \$50 billion in U.S. health care costs, showing access to clean, nutritious and high quality foods like ours boost the health and vitality of our communities. The saying, "farmers are healthcare providers" is very true, and ensuring community access to whole, healthy diets is preventive health care *at its finest*.

Crop Cash Plus was *instrumental* in fostering expanded food accessibility and promoting community health, enabling more people to access our Real Organic, pasture-raised chicken products, as well as other high quality meat, dairy and value added foods directly from our fellow farmers and producers. The Crop Cash Plus expansion revealed an opportunity to significantly impact both SNAP/EBT users and farms like ours by allowing a larger segment of the community to engage with and access food products that were previously not eligible for purchase. Crop Cash Plus ensured more producers in Vermont could accept this payment voucher and participate in this vital food access program.

During the 2024-2025 season, Crop Cash Plus unfortunately was not funded, creating confusion amongst shoppers about what they could spend their vouchers on, and ultimately disappointment when low income shoppers realized they would need to pay out of pocket for a healthy food product they had been able to access the season before. We had community members express that they would not be able to purchase our chicken, eggs, and broth as frequently, or in some cases at all, unless the program came back. This is why we need the state to support consistent funding to NOFA-VT, by allocating \$500,000 in base funding for Crop Cash (Plus) and Farm Share.

Hi everyone, my name is Justin Bramhall and I want to outline another enormous benefit of the Crop Cash initiatives, which has to do with the increased spending at farmers markets. The impact of encouraging this type of shopping for Vermonters is resoundingly positive, not only on sales figures for farmers like us, but also in fostering a stronger social connection within our local communities.

I moved to Putney, Vermont in 2019 to begin my farming dream. I focused on selling through the local farmers markets because I knew it would give me the chance of connecting with the local community on a weekly basis. We now sell our products at 3 farmers markets, the West River Farmers' Market in Londonderry, the Putney Farmers Market, both the summer and their winter holiday season, and the Brattleboro Winter Farmers Market. We're really lucky to have access to so many great farmers markets here in Vermont! They give us frequent and direct exposure with our community members and customers in our region year-round, deepening our connection to one another. We grow to rely on each other, and we consistently experience the joy that the farmers markets bring about through these connections. Through these markets we see how many of our fellow Vermonters rely on this program to sustain their diets, with at least 10% of our farm's sales being attributed to the Crop Cash Plus initiative in the '23-24 winter season. During the '24-25 season, veggie vendors report with 30% of their market sales being attributed to the Crop Cash program.

With every dollar, low-income Vermonters can purchase healthy, fresh, local food and Vermont farmers are able to set a reliable, fair price for their goods. State funding is necessary to maximize the federal and philanthropic dollars these programs can leverage. The State of Vermont can make policy choices that will ensure food security for everyone who lives here, while ensuring our farmers can profit from growing the food we all need. Crop Cash Plus is key to Vermont's food security and a viable agricultural sector. Without the continuation of this program the finances of farmers and ranchers will undoubtedly suffer and so will the many connections this program has allowed between farmers and under-served communities.

Continuing the Crop Cash Plus program is not merely about financial gains, it's about fostering a sustainable, resilient, and interconnected local food system. It's about access to wholesome, nourishing foods that keep our community healthy and strong. And it's about creating reliable support for the people who feed us all- farmers.

We wholeheartedly advocate for the request for \$500,000 in base funding for the Crop Cash (Plus) and Farm Share programs to ensure support for Vermont farmers and enable our communities to access an incredible array of nourishing, local foods. Your support in this matter will undoubtedly make a profound difference in supporting Vermont agriculture and the accessibility of local food for all of our cherished customers.

Thank you so much for your attention to this, for your ongoing dedication to promoting sustainable agriculture and community health in Vermont and for having us here to speak with you today. We are grateful for your time.