

Johanna Doren
Winooski, VT
johanna@nofavt.org
802-434-7162

Public Hearing on the Governor's Recommended Fiscal Year 2026 Budget

Re: Support \$500,000 in base funding for NOFA Vermont's Crop Cash (Plus) and Farm Share programs

My name is Johanna Doren, I live in Winooski, and I am the Local Food Access Director with the Northeast Organic Farming Association of Vermont (NOFA-VT), where I oversee the Crop Cash (Plus) and Farm Share Programs. Thank you for listening to my testimony.

I am here to ask you to please support \$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 Crop Cash and Farm Share Programs provide financial assistance to low-income Vermonters to buy fresh food from their local farmers. We are grateful to have received \$300,000 in one-time funding in FY25 for Crop Cash and Farm Share, which has allowed us to successfully maintain increased food security while directly supporting Vermont farmers. We need continued funding so that these proven programs can keep leveraging federal and philanthropic dollars, and continue supporting low-income Vermonters and farmers alike.

In 2023, we were able to offer an expansion to Crop Cash – called Crop Cash Plus – which gave money to low-income Vermonters to purchase meat, eggs, dairy, and other food at their farmers markets, beyond the fruits and vegetables that Crop Cash assists with. To say this program expansion was a huge success is an understatement. Farmers Markets saw new SNAP customers come to their markets, and usage of the Crop Cash (Plus) program about tripled from the previous year.

Unfortunately we had to pause the Crop Cash Plus expansion in 2024, due to a lack of funding. We heard from many customers that, without Crop Cash Plus, they couldn't afford to buy meat, cheese, eggs, and other foods that make up a whole diet. For Vermonters with incredibly limited food budgets, the addition of Crop Cash Plus is key for them to fulfill their nutritional needs. One Montpelier resident shared the importance of the Crop Cash Plus expansion.

“As a working Vermont artist and author who is low income with multiple disabilities, it can be difficult for me to make ends meet. The Crop Cash program is incredibly important to me for keeping fresh foods on my table at home. But perhaps even more importantly, due to my disabilities, the Crop Cash Plus program was incredibly helpful last year. One of my essential medications requires that I have high fat foods whenever I take it. Fresh fruits and veggies will rarely meet that threshold. So being able to get dairy foods and eggs with Crop Cash Plus is INCREDIBLY important for me to meet my nutrition needs. I truly hope you will find the funds to continue this program, as with the rising costs of food, making ends meet is becoming harder and harder!”

Crop Cash Plus also provided an economic boost to our local farmers. By expanding Crop Cash beyond produce, we doubled the number of farmers that could receive income through the program and provided an additional \$200,000 in farmer revenue. This year, we heard from farmers that grow meat, cheese, eggs, and non-vegetable products that they felt the loss of income, and of a new customer base they had built in 2023. As one farmer stated, "I was sad to see Crop Cash Plus end. I sell meat. There are not as many people buying it this year. The customers who had Crop Cash Plus last year must not be able to afford local meat without it."

In the wake of inflation, high food prices, more frequent flooding, and the end of pandemic-era supports, it is vital that the state invests in these programs. 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) and Farm Share are key to Vermont's food security and a viable agricultural sector.

Once again, please support \$500,000 in base funding for NOFA Vermont's Crop Cash (Plus) and Farm Share programs, to strengthen farm viability and address food security. Thank you so much for your time.