

FARM SECURITY FUND

Written Testimony to The Vermont House and Senate Committees on Appropriations Feb 2026

Stephen Leslie

Cedar Mountain Farm & Cobb Hill Cheese (farmer-member NOFA-VT)

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Thank you for this opportunity to submit written comments. I am writing today to ask that you please appropriate \$15.6 million in FY2027 for the Farm and Forest Operations Security Special Fund.

We manage a small dairy of 20 Jersey milking cows, a cheese-making plant, and sixty acres of gardens, orchards, hay fields and pasture. As with all farmers, we find ourselves on the front line of climate change, dealing with unseasonable extremes of weather and new pests and diseases. Farmers in our region are contending with increased moisture in the form of “precipitation events” and at the same time “flash droughts” that put Ag producers to the test. A 2024 climate impact study out of UVM finds that our annual precipitation has increased by 20% since the 1970’s and may increase another 20% by 2050. Softer winters and increased rainfall bring new pests and diseases. Overall it is warmer and the growing season is longer, but our already famously changeable New England weather has become increasingly erratic. Just this past week it was 27 degrees in Miami, Florida and 37 degrees in Juneau, Alaska.

We are trying to implement practices to mitigate and adapt to these rapid changes and to be part of a larger regional movement aiming to create a resilient, re-localized and sovereign food system. For 26 years we have farmed organically. In 2020 we began integrating elements of agroforestry into every aspect of the farm landscape.

However, along with the challenges presented by an increasingly unstable climate, we face the economic hardship of trying to run a small diversified farm within the context of our global industrial food system. Fixed costs continue to rise but the price points for commodity milk and produce remains stagnant and seldom covers real cost of production. Like so many farmers, we have had to accrue long-term debt for infrastructure and annual operating debt simply to remain in operation. Our greatest accomplishment may be that we have held true to our values *and* survived. Our story is a relative success within the overall demise of the small dairy farm in the Northeast. When we started farming in the Upper Valley in 1996 Vermont had 2500 dairies and is now down to less than 450.

These precarious economic circumstances make us even more vulnerable to potential climate-driven weather disasters. For instance, this past summer, because of the intense drought in eastern Windsor County, we had to remove cows from the pastures in early August, and began feeding bought-in hay two months ahead of “normal”. If farmers of all sizes are to survive these stressors we must have safety nets in place to help us get through these unprecedented weather and climate related challenges. That’s why I am asking that you please appropriate \$15.6 million in FY2027 for the Farm and Forest Operations Security Special Fund.

Thank you for your time and attention to these matters,

Stephen Leslie