

Testimony to the Senate Economic Development, Housing, General Affairs Committee re: FY27 Budget

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Thank you Chair Clarkson and committee members for taking the time to hear from me and my colleague Johanna Doren today regarding NOFA-VT's requests for the FY27 state budget. For the record, my name is Jess Hays Lucas and I'm the Grassroots Policy Organizer at the Northeast Organic Farming Association of Vermont (NOFA-VT).

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I want to thank committee members for your votes in support of S.60—now Act 78—the Farm & Forestry Operations Security Special Fund, and ask you to please include an appropriation of \$15.6 million in your FY2027 budget memo to support the fund's implementation. As a reminder, the Farm Security Fund will provide rapid response relief payments to farmers and loggers impacted by extreme weather, and will be administered by the Agency of Agriculture, Food & Markets in collaboration with a review board.

Without an appropriation in the FY27 budget, the fund will not be implemented for the upcoming fiscal year. Unfortunately, we know that climate change and extreme weather conditions are here to stay. Farmers and loggers need state-based, rapidly available financial support to recover when they inevitably experience losses.

We understand particularly this year that you have hard choices to make. In order to make those choices fairly and with as much information as possible, we are presenting you with the request based on the demonstrated need from the past three years, and the importance and growing potential of Vermont's working lands economies.

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Our working lands businesses can't shoulder the costs of extreme weather alone. Over the last three years, Vermont's Department of Forests, Parks and Recreation and the Agency of Agriculture, Food & Markets have gathered some important indicators of the economic impacts on farms and forestry operations from floods, untimely freeze events, and the recent historic drought, finding just over \$94 million in losses over the last three years. These losses were reported to the state in survey responses or as part of applications for BEGAP funding.

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We know that the documented losses are likely less than the total losses actually experienced by farmers and forestry businesses over the past three years. The existence of the Farm & Forestry Operations Security Special Fund will also help the state better track the impacts of extreme weather on farms and forestry operations over time, providing more accurate data for future appropriations.

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Investing in the viability of Vermont's working lands businesses is an investment in significant economic activity in our state. In 2022, the sale of Vermont farm products alone totaled just over \$1 billion. That \$1 billion in farm gate sales was the foundation for \$11.5 billion in total economic output, when accounting for food system wide activity. Ensuring our farms can rebound when extreme weather hits is one thing we can do to protect not only the heart and culture of our state, but a substantial economic engine that creates jobs, circulates dollars in our local economies, and inspires young people to move here or to stay and make their living on the land.

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Finally, we want to be clear that state funding is needed in order for the Farm and Forestry Operations Security Special Fund to achieve its goals. We know too well that federal funding to support our farms in times of disaster is not responsive nor reliable, if appropriated at all. The fact that the state is still waiting on millions appropriated by Congress in December 2024 to provide relief from disasters for the two years prior is evidence of this. Farmers and loggers cannot afford to wait a full three years to receive relief when catastrophic weather hits. While federal funds are deeply needed, state-based appropriations for this fund are as much a buffer for our farmers as they are against the lethargic pace of federal support.

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Farmers are always responding to their environment, often immediately and with great innovation. The State needs to respond to farmers who suffer loss in the same way to ensure our farms can continue to produce the food we all need.

Again, please include \$15.6 million for the Farm & Forestry Operations Security Special Fund in your FY27 budget memo to the Appropriations Committee. Thank you for your time, and your commitment to our working lands and those who tend them.