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Testimony to Senate Committee on Health and Welfare re: NOFA-VT Local Food Security FY26 Budget Request

Thank you, Chair Lyons and committee for inviting me to come talk with you today. For the record, my name is Johanna Doren and I am the Local Food Access Director at the Northeast Organic Farming Association of Vermont.

**NOFA-VT is requesting \$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.** Each of these programs provides financial assistance to low-income Vermonters to buy fresh food from their local farmers. These long-standing statewide programs are truly a win-win. With every dollar invested, low-income Vermonters can purchase more healthy, fresh, local food that they could not purchase otherwise.

Crop Cash doubles 3SquaresVT (SNAP) benefits, dollar for dollar, for fruits and vegetables purchased at over 40 Vermont farmers markets. This means that when a 3SVT customer uses their food benefits at a participating farmers market, they can get a matching dollar amount of Crop Cash coupons to spend on fruits, vegetables, herbs, and plant seeds and starts at the market. A program participant who shops at the Burlington Farmers Market shared why she needs this program: "I am food insecure, even with \$291/month in food stamps and fixed income from SSDI of less than \$1,100/month. Crop Cash gives me an extra \$60-80/month when I can get to the Farmer's Market, and helps me eat more whole, fresh produce that I might not otherwise be able to afford. Food is extremely expensive. We desperately need programs like Crop Cash. Crop Cash [also] helps me justify spending more than at Walmart to live in accordance with my values and priorities." **Crop Cash is majority federally funded, but requires a local match. State funding is needed to continue drawing down on these federal funds.**

Crop Cash Plus was a 2023 pilot funded by a one-time appropriation in the FY23 state budget. It expanded Crop Cash to all SNAP-eligible foods, since federal funding for Crop Cash is restricted just to fruits and vegetables. This meant that 3SVT customers had greater access to buying most agricultural products sold at farmers markets, like eggs, meat, cheese, bread. A quick story about a Montpelier resident: Ashley Strobridge, a working Vermont artist and author who is low-income with multiple disabilities, found the Crop Cash Plus program vital for their health in 2023. As they shared with me, "One of my essential medications requires that I have high fat foods whenever I take that medication. Fresh fruits and veggies will rarely meet that threshold. So being able to get dairy 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!" **State funding is necessary in order to bring back Crop Cash Plus.**

Finally, the Farm Share program subsidizes CSA shares for limited-income Vermonters by paying for 25-75% of the CSA cost. We have been running this program for 30 years and it has proven to be a key component of community food security and health. A participant in Springfield, who is a low-income senior, shared that the Farm Share Program has helped her to maintain a healthy diet and contributed to her cancer going into remission. She called the program a life-saver, saying “there are too many low-income families and seniors in Vermont who have little enough access to essential food.” **We need state funding to supplement our philanthropic funds as demand for this program has increased.**

The House included \$300,000 in one-time funding for these programs in their FY26 budget, which would support Farm Share and Crop Cash. In order to run the Crop Cash Plus program as well, however, we need the full \$500,000. As I discussed above, Crop Cash Plus is important for 3SVT participants to access local meat, eggs, dairy, and bread.

We are asking for \$500,000 in base funding in FY26 so that we can continue to meet the increasing demand for Crop Cash and Farm Share, continue to draw down federal and philanthropic funds, and fill the funding gap for the Crop Cash Plus expansion. Crop Cash (Plus) and Farm Share are proven programs that help Vermont achieve food security, making local food more affordable for Vermonters. We hope you will support NOFA-VT’s full budget request. Thank you for your time and consideration.