

In support of: HB-5536

I am writing to make sure RI legislators know how crucial the Bonus Bucks program is, and how transformative it has been on the health, dignity, and overall well-being of Rhode Islanders who are spending SNAP dollars as carefully and thoughtfully as they can.

Bonus Bucks is creating a more sustainable economy for all of us, circulating dollars into Rhode Island's food economy from people who rarely have an opportunity to do so otherwise. It's putting money into our own farms. Why would we choose to increase profits for big box stores and growing operations that have no positive impact on us whatsoever? Let's focus on making RI's food system strong, for producers and consumers alike.

This program has been making a tremendous impact since 2009 - it's not new, and it's not a part of any pandemic-era programs. Bonus Bucks have been offered at most farmers market across the state since 2015. The state owes a HUGE "thank you" to Farm Fresh RI for this success. They have independently fundraised for and administered the program to date which has distributed over \$1.7MIL in Bonus Bucks to local Rhode Island farmers since its inception.

It's overdue for the State of Rhode Island to step up to the plate here. We are the only state left in New England that is not providing this type of program.

Bonus Bucks is currently supported by the USDA Gus Schumacher Nutrition Incentive program which requires \$1 for \$1 matching of federal funds. We can ask for more funds from USDA, but Farm Fresh can no longer support the match entirely on their own. To that point, it is important to note that should the Gus Schumacher program be cut at the federal level, state funds will sustain the program for the 2026 summer season when redemption is highest.

It is also important to note that a current DHS pilot matching SNAP for fresh produce is operating in large scale grocery stores (Stop & Shop and Walmart) which cuts out direct payments to small farms and is funded at a significantly higher funding level than this modest appropriations request. This does not make good sense!

Please invest in your constituents wisely.

Thank you!