



May 22nd, 2025

Dear Chairman Abney and Members of the House Finance Committee,

On behalf of Farm Fresh Rhode Island, I am writing in strong support of ***H5536: entitled, joint resolution making an appropriation of \$200,000 to be used for incentives for fruits and vegetables sold at participating bonus bucks outlets in Rhode Island.*** Our organization operates a range of innovative programs that enhance the local food system of Rhode Island and the broader Northeast region with particular attention to balancing farm viability and access to fresh food regardless of economic status.

Since 2009 Farm Fresh RI has been independently fundraising for and administering the Bonus Bucks program which doubles the value of federal SNAP dollars spent on fruits and vegetables at most local seasonal farmers markets statewide. This small but mighty program has grown to be an established and well understood system for market vendors, shoppers and community advocates who have come to rely on it. Over the past 16 years Farm Fresh RI has funded and distributed \$1.7 MIL in Bonus Bucks matching SNAP benefit which means the program has funneled \$3.4 MIL into the local food and agricultural economy. Through the COVID-19 pandemic we saw numbers double but they have since leveled out and we are now distributing and redeeming roughly \$240,000 in Bonus Bucks annually. As the program has grown and scaled we need to ensure its availability in the years to come and this means state support to prevent disruptions in service.

Rhode Island is currently the only state in New England who has never and is not currently dedicating state funds to support SNAP match programs similar to Bonus Bucks which connect farmers and local food insecure populations. Maine, New Hampshire and Connecticut are funding these programs at levels ranging from \$100,000 to \$250,000 annually while our neighbors in Massachusetts have been funding the program for over \$15 MIL on an annual basis.

The Bonus Bucks program is currently funded through a federal USDA Gus Schumacher Nutrition Incentive Program (GusNIP) grant which is funded through May 2026. Funding for the GusNIP grant is highly competitive with less than 30% of projects funded annually. We will apply for GusNIP this year to attempt to secure funding for FY26 but the program is structured with a \$1 for \$1 matching requirement for all project costs. As the program has scaled over the years, this match has become increasingly challenging to secure and receiving matching state dollars will strengthen our application and increase ability to access federal dollars. The \$200,000 appropriations request will cover a majority of anticipated direct incentive dollars for one program year and Farm Fresh RI will continue to fundraise for all administrative and evaluations costs to operate the program.

Funding for this program is a win-win for public health and economic development. It empowers SNAP participants to be able to access healthy locally grown produce and strengthens our local Rhode Island food economy by directing federal food dollars into small food and farm businesses. Now more than ever we need to be prioritizing investing in solutions that have dual impacts to support healthy communities and keep our tax dollars in the state.

Thank you for your consideration,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'JR', with a long horizontal stroke extending to the right.

Jesse Rye
Executive Director
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