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**Adirondack Food System Network Testimony for the Joint Legislative Budget Hearing on
Agriculture and Parks and Recreation**

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Thank you for allowing me to speak today on the importance of the State budget to North Country communities, farmers and producers, and consumers across the region. My name is Josh Stephani and I represent the Adirondack Food System Network (“AFSN”), a collaborative effort across the 12-county North Country to address the challenges, gaps, and opportunities within our food system. Since 2020, our Network works to broaden collaboration across the sectors, bringing and building capacity to organizations already stretched thin, and advocate for the North Country throughout the state and country.

The Adirondack Park is a unique place – 6 million acres, over 100 towns and villages, 130,000 year round residents compared to some 13 million visitors each year. For residents, for consumers, and for farmers in this region, our agricultural needs are often overshadowed by other needs throughout the state. Yet, for our communities, the need and investment is growing.

Yet, it is worth reiterating: agriculture remains the foundation of our livelihood and the success of our Adirondack communities. The Adirondack region remains critical to New York State’s agricultural market. According to the most recent USDA census, our region produces over 15% of the state’s entire agricultural output, roughly \$1 billion annually. Yet, our food system does not end at our county lines or even the ‘Blue Line’ of the Adirondack Park. Food grown in the North Country makes its way well beyond the borders of the Adirondacks, to regions of New York, and even other states. For our rural communities, our livelihoods come at a cost of economics.

However, as I am sure that you are aware, farmers and producers all over the state are facing difficult conditions. New York’s farm economy has been struggling for years and recent events have exacerbated the problems. New York’s agricultural and farming communities are under a barrage of continual threats. From increasing climate fluctuations to transportation and distribution limitations, from rising costs on materials and products to labor shortages, and

disappearing local grocery stores, North Country producers, consumers, and distributors face a disappearing local market. Regional flooding and droughts are just the tip of the proverbial iceberg in 2024.

Protecting and investing in New York lands, agricultural producers in rural communities, and the environment must be at the forefront of New York's budget priorities.

AFSN applauds Governor Hochul's Executive budget proposal to raise funding for clean water infrastructure to \$6 billion and continued support for the Environmental Protection Fund at \$400 million. Both of these programs are critical for Adirondack communities and the natural beauty. As we discuss continued threats from climate change, AFSN asks the legislature to further expand programs to protect the natural and agricultural environment. Programs like Farmland Protection, our Soil and Water Conservation Districts, and Cornell Cooperative Extension services provide much needed support to businesses, farms, and communities throughout the state.

Furthermore, AFSN is excited to see a commitment to provide healthy and universal meals to our children and the continued support of the Farm to School Grants and 30% Farm to School Reimbursement programs. These programs are critical to providing healthy and fresh options for children in schools and supporting local food economies. Additionally, these programs incentivize and offset the purchasing of local food.

While they are beyond the scope of this committee, emergency feeding programs, such as Nourish New York, and HPNAP—the Hunger Prevention and Nutrition Assistance Program, provide another market outlet for farmers in the North Country to provide their products directly into their communities and to individuals and families in need. We ask that both these programs be funded at \$75 million each with expanded options for direct contracting. By increasing funds, these programs open up opportunities for our farmers and our consumers to access and enjoy local, fresh, and healthy options.

As the 2022 USDA census has shown, farmers across our region are aging and many farmers in the North Country remain unprepared to transition their farm into new farmers. We ask that funding be allocated to support farmer succession planning and resources to strengthen farm ownership through the Department of Agriculture and Markets. Similarly, with labor shortages impacting farms, we support increasing funding for the New York State Farm Worker Housing Program, currently funded at \$15 million to \$20 million.

These programs are essential to our livelihoods and future. At the same time, stronger investment is needed to address the system challenges and root causes rather than to provide a proverbial bandage for a symptom. AFSN asks both houses to consider funding a grant program aimed at

supporting research around community food assessments and councils. Through these regional councils, a more localized and direct understanding and remedy can be established. While this work has been started across the state, New York can further unite its regions and amplify innovation and solutions to some of the most intractable aspects of agriculture and the food system.

New York must do its part to open markets for producers and consumers alike. They are a win for our farmers as well as the communities most in need of these products. By funding essential access programs, this money returns directly into local economies, provides necessary nutritional resources to families, and creates financial stability that transcends beyond government assistance and security.

Thank you again for your support and opportunity to provide testimony. AFSN believes that through collaboration across our region and state, we can take bold steps to amplify agriculture in New York. While our rural communities are strong and resilient, our food system demands attention and support from our legislative bodies and Executive Chamber.

I look forward to continuing to make New York a bastion of agriculture and healthy communities.