



THE GOOD ACRE
FOOD + COMMUNITY

March 1, 2023

Dear Chair Vang and Members of the Committee,

My name is David Van Eeckhout. I am the Farm Program Director at The Good Acre, a nonprofit Food Hub based in Falcon Heights, Minnesota. Before coming to The Good Acre, my wife and I operated our own organic vegetable farm serving the Twin Cities area for 15 years. In my current role as Farm Program Director I am able to bring the farmer's voice and perspective into much of our work at The Good Acre. I am here today on behalf of our organization and the many farmers we work with to express our support for House File 1744, a grant to The Good Acre for the Local Emergency Assistance Farmer Fund also known as LEAFF.

LEAFF began in 2020 as a multi-organizational collaboration to support emerging vegetable farmers due to the loss of their typical markets caused by the pandemic. In the early days of the pandemic when we were all watching fields of produce with no market get disked under on the news, we brought together a diverse group of organizations to make sure that didn't happen to local farmers who were busy seeding and planting in their greenhouses in preparation for the 2020 season. Many farmers were able to pivot to online sales and other new opportunities, but for farmers with language barriers, technology challenges, or lack of emergency funds, there was a need for a program that would support these farmers through a challenging year. At the same time, hungry families were lining up all over the state to get access to food as employees were laid off and schools were closed.

In conjunction with our partners, we developed the LEAFF program, where farmers accepted into the program are guaranteed a fixed amount of market rate sales to The Good Acre. The purchased produce is then donated to multiple hunger relief organizations as well as directly to consumers through community school-based distribution sites. What has made LEAFF such a successful program is that it was designed by farmers for farmers. Another farmer, Ariel Pressman, and I brought the farmer perspective to the development of the program, emphasizing the needs of farmers in order to make the program a success. Meeting the farmers where they were at was our constant objective.

In the last three years LEAFF has purchased over \$784,000 worth of produce from 88 participating farmers, who then spend that money back in their local communities. Those purchases have resulted in over 435,000 pounds of #1 quality fresh produce being donated to hunger relief organizations for distribution throughout Minnesota.

LEAFF has turned out to be much more than an emergency pivot during the pandemic. It has been a powerful program that has had a major impact on farmers.





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LEAFF is a program of critical importance that:

- Provides a new market opportunity for farmers
- Provides a source of fresh, culturally-relevant produce donations for communities in need
- Teaches farmers new skills for selling to wholesale markets
- Reduces food waste on farms
- Helps farmers manage risk on their farms
- Has become a model for other communities to develop similar programs

LEAFF provides a market opportunity for farmers by reducing barriers. A farmer wishing to access wholesale markets is faced with many challenges. Wholesale markets can require constant communication about availability, ordering and distribution. Complicated and expensive food-safety certifications are common with wholesale buyers. Access to required packaging and knowledge of packing standards is not readily available. Wholesale buyers may require liability insurance and other business documentation. LEAFF was built to address all of these barriers. LEAFF farmers must deliver to The Good Acre's warehouse during certain days and times and only bring crops from a pre-approved list, but farmers do not need to let us know they are coming, nor do they need to tell us what they are bringing. They may choose to use their LEAFF funds in whatever way makes sense for their business. We simplified all packaging to just two box sizes, and boxes must be full, but do not need to be weighed. The Good Acre purchases a semi-load of packaging each year to offer at reduced pricing to farmers in the program.

LEAFF provides a source of fresh, culturally-relevant produce to communities in need. Hunger relief organizations struggle to find sources of truly fresh produce. Often what they have access to is tired remainders from large grocery chains. The response we have gotten from organizations to fresh LEAFF produce has been wildly enthusiastic. A line forms at distribution sites when LEAFF produce is due to arrive. Communities in need are getting access to #1 fresh quality produce, just like they would see at the farmer's market. Nourishment is not simply physiological, it is also psychological, and being able to receive produce that is relevant to your culture, was grown by your neighbors and was harvested within the past few days can have a profound impact on the recipient. Some LEAFF produce is also distributed through community-based distributions, which can bring the produce to community-members who may have a negative stigma attached to using food shelves or other traditional distribution sites, or that may not be able to provide some of the documentation that a food shelf requires.

LEAFF teaches farmers new skills for selling to wholesale markets. Education is a constant theme for the LEAFF program. This begins with providing farmers a list of accepted produce items and their packaging requirements. When a farmer shows up with their first delivery, our staff walks them through the process. We look at the items the farmers deliver and let them know if we have any concerns or suggestions about how to improve the products for their next delivery. Do we need the sizes to be larger or smaller, does the product need to be cleaner? Are there pest or disease issues with the product?





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We teach farmers how to stack cases on a pallet and how to write up an invoice for us as a buyer. Each delivery better prepares the farmer for the expectations of selling to wholesale markets. We are in a unique position to be able to train farmers for a wholesale market that we have built. Farmers who began to work with us because of the LEAFF program have gone on to sell The Good Acre's other wholesale customers almost two million dollars in produce over the past three years. Providing a stable and consistent market that builds economic mobility in our local agriculture community. This aspect of the LEAFF program also complements many other statewide programs such as Farm to School or Good Food Access by giving farmers hands-on training in selling to new markets.

LEAFF reduces food waste on farms. Recent studies have shown that up to one-third of marketable yield is left unharvested in the field on large commercial produce farms. Smaller farms have a much better track record when it comes to on-farm food waste, but they still need to hedge their bets by overplanting to meet market demands. The flexibility built into the LEAFF program has allowed farmers to deliver the items they have in abundance. This has resulted in 98% of farmers in the LEAFF program reporting that LEAFF has reduced or even eliminated the amount of food wasted on their farms.

LEAFF helps farmers manage risk on their farms. Almost all commodity crop producers in the U.S. participate in federally-subsidized crop insurance, at a cost of over \$10 Billion annually to taxpayers. Exactly none of the 88 farmers who have participated in LEAFF in the past participate in crop insurance programs. Crop insurance for small specialty-crop producers is very limited and very complex. It cannot be counted on as a useful means of risk management for these farmers. LEAFF offers a way to provide some market-based Risk Management by being able to guarantee farmers a certain level of sales, and not tie it to a specific crop; if a farmer has a failure of one crop, but an abundance of another, LEAFF offers the flexibility that they can bring whatever they have a surplus of. Many small specialty-crop farmers manage risk by overplanting, so that in a bad year they still will have enough to sell at their markets. This often results in extra produce beyond their market needs. Capturing the value of this overplanted product is an important part of the program and a substantial way that the state can invest in risk management for all farmers.

LEAFF has become a model for other communities to develop similar programs. LEAFF was built to support the community in which it was based. In LEAFF's current form 100% of LEAFF farmers meet MDA's definition of emerging farmer. Federal farm assistance during the pandemic mostly left these farmers behind, while over 31 billion dollars went to help large commodity farms. We have been approached by community partners in greater Minnesota to help them bring a version of this program to their communities. The LEAFF program that exists at our facility in Falcon Heights is based on the needs of the community partners around the Twin Cities. This bill would support the development of pilot programs, which will be based around the needs of the communities in which they are located.





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We are honored and grateful that the LEAFF program has been included in the Governor's budget recommendations again this year. State officials have spoken on multiple occasions of the importance of the LEAFF program and urged its expansion. Unfortunately the level of funding put forward by the Governor's recommendation is a significant decrease over the \$250K we received from MDA in Fiscal Year 2023. We bring this bill before you today to encourage you to support LEAFF at a sustainable level. Each year demand outweighs the available funding for the program. We could easily have accepted 100 farms into the program in 2022 with adequate funding, and our list of farmers inquiring about the program continues to grow. In this bill we are requesting \$400K in annual funding, with up to 25% of the amount allocated annually to cover direct farmer technical assistance and training, logistical support and development of pilot programs. To illustrate what that entails, In 2022 the LEAFF program received 462 deliveries from 65 different farms. Each one of those 462 deliveries involves helping farmers to unload, inspecting products and offering farmer suggestions, inventorying items, reviewing farmer invoices or helping the farmer create one. Each delivery then must be inventoried in our coolers and made available to program partners, and farmer invoices must be entered in our accounting system and paid out within 15 days of receipt. It is a high-touch program, with a tremendous impact.

Since its beginning, LEAFF has maintained its focus on farmers by listening to our farm partners. We are continually listening to farmer feedback, most recently in the fall of 2022, engaging with over 60 farmers across three gatherings, including hosting two that were exclusively in Hmong, with no staff from The Good Acre present, so that farmers can give honest feedback anonymously. This farmer engagement has shaped the program to provide more flexible delivery times, introduce new culturally-relevant crops, and to adjust pricing to better meet market conditions. 100% of the farmers who participate in LEAFF want the program to continue. Speaking as a farmer myself, I know that getting 100% of farmers to agree on anything is quite an accomplishment on its own.

LEAFF isn't an idea, it is a real program that is working to help emerging farmers right now. I am here this evening because farmers want the program to continue. I wish we could have more farmers in the room with us tonight, but at this same moment we are hosting a food safety training for farmers with U of M extension that was scheduled months ago. Please help the farmers by continuing to support the LEAFF program at a sustainable level by supporting House File 1744.

Thank you, and I'm happy to answer any questions.

Sincerely,

David Van Eeckhout
Farm Program Director
The Good Acre

