

# The Providence Journal

## POLITICS

# 'Make good on the contract': How Trump's spending freeze has left RI farmers in a lurch.



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### Key Points AI-assisted summary ⓘ

President Donald Trump's freeze on federal funding is affecting Rhode Island's food system, including farms, nonprofits and government programs.

Organizations like the Rhode Island Food Policy Council and Farm Fresh Rhode Island face uncertainty as grants for composting, farmer training and food access programs are frozen.

Farmers are concerned about the lack of clarity and potential cuts to funding, which could impact their ability to operate and provide food for the community.

EAST GREENWICH – After outbreaks of the coronavirus among their workers shut down some of the nation's biggest meat processing plants during the pandemic five years ago, the government responded to resulting fears about vulnerabilities in the food supply chain by investing in new facilities.

Pat's Pastured was one of the beneficiaries. The 150-acre family farm in East Greenwich that raises beef, chicken, turkeys and pigs was awarded a \$250,000 grant from the U.S. Department of Agriculture to expand its processing plant so that it could serve other nearby farmers and help make the region's network of food suppliers more resilient.

The final piece of the project was the installation of new walk-in refrigerators and freezers, but when owner Pat McNiff recently submitted the \$36,000 purchase to the USDA for approval under the contractually obligated grant, he got no response.

“We put in for it, but we haven't heard anything yet, and there's no timeline on us getting it,” McNiff said.

People and organizations throughout Rhode Island's food system are feeling the disruption caused by President Donald Trump's freeze on federal funding.

The biggest single casualty so far appears to be the Rhode Island Food Policy Council, the organization that coordinates work across the state's close-knit network of food-related businesses and nonprofits.

The council was awarded an \$18.7 million grant from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency in December to expand composting in Rhode Island. The council had already started spending money on the initiative, but, as with other grant recipients around the country, last month it was frozen out of the EPA portal to seek reimbursement.

Farm Fresh Rhode Island, the recipient of a USDA grant in support of its mission to connect growers with buyers, was told just a few days ago by federal officials that it would only be able to seek reimbursements for spending through Jan. 19, the day before Trump's inauguration, even though it had paid for services beyond that date.

Southside Community Land Trust received a \$60,000 USDA grant to replace the old diesel-powered system that heats the greenhouses at its farm in Cranston, but the money came from the Biden administration's Inflation Reduction Act, part of a slew of climate funding streams that have been cut off by Trump.

Farming is in decline across the nation, and while Rhode Island has seen big losses in farmland and the number of farm businesses over the last 50 years, it's also experienced a resurgence more recently with the support of the state's thriving food scene.

Advocates for the industry say the lack of clarity from the Trump administration around funding will make an industry that's already hard to survive in even harder.

"It's actually harming our ability to feed our nation," said Margaret DeVos, executive director of Southside.

## **Food hub that connects farmers to buyers feels the pinch**

The impacts of a loss in federal funding wouldn't just be felt by farmers. The three programs that may be most at risk at Farm Fresh are also aimed at supporting vulnerable populations.

The largest is known as Bonus Bucks, which offers incentives to people who qualify for Supplemental Nutritional Assistance Program benefits to shop at farmers markets. The

program leverages federal grant money to offer a dollar-for-dollar match on SNAP purchases in order to encourage recipients to buy fresh fruit and vegetables from local sources. It offers recipients healthier eating alternatives and keeps their spending in state.

Farm Fresh started the program in 2009, has since helped expand it across New England, and is currently in charge of a nearly \$5 million USDA grant that expires next year to pay for Bonus Bucks in Rhode Island, Connecticut, New Hampshire, Vermont and Maine.

“The current funding has not been disrupted as yet, but the application for future funding has been taken down,” said Farm Fresh executive director Jesse Rye.

Farm Fresh also runs a program using USDA funds to buy fresh produce from Rhode Island farmers to stock food pantries. Funding is set to run out this year, and the organization submitted an application before the change in administration for another \$1.2 million to cover the costs of the program for three more years but has yet to hear anything about it.

It also hasn't gotten word about another USDA-funded program it operates to supply locally grown food to public schools. Farm Fresh paid \$150,000 to cover the January costs and was able to submit its receipts for reimbursement, but the money hasn't come through yet.

“We don't know if that will be delayed or not,” Rye said.

But he did get word from the USDA, that reimbursements would be frozen for Farm Fresh's marketing work in support of farmers markets.

The organization spent \$10,000 on the work in January, but Rye said he was told it would only get paid for anything done up to the inauguration date. Under the contract with the federal agency, Farm Fresh was supposed to continue the work through September and was due another \$150,000.

The USDA did not respond to a request for comment about the funding freeze.

Farm Fresh, which gets about 40% of its funding from the federal government, is in the direct line of fire of any cuts. But farmers, too, would suffer if Bonus Bucks, the school program or the food pantry program go away, Rye said. They would already be buying seeds and making other preparations to supply those programs.

“Finding new markets for their produce is much harder than making good on the commitments that are already there,” Rye said. “We'll try our best to mitigate those impacts, but in some cases, there won't be another market that can step in.”

## Composting program, farmer training threatened

When it was awarded the \$18.7 million grant from the EPA for composting last December, the Rhode Island Food Policy Council described it as a “generational investment” in the state’s effort to reduce food waste and free up valuable landfill space.

The program would use the money from the Inflation Reduction Act to ramp up composting in and around Providence and Newport. With partners that include municipalities, state agencies and even the Navy, it would work with 300 businesses, schools and other organizations, as well as 15,000 households, to pick up compostable material and process it.

The endeavor would create nearly 40 jobs and result in more than 11,000 tons being diverted from the Central Landfill in Johnston, which is expected to reach capacity by 2046. It would also reduce planet-warming methane emissions from rotting food and cut down on tipping fees that the participating communities must pay to dump their refuse in the landfill.

Now, the future of the work is uncertain, said Diane Lynch, executive director of the food council.

“At this point, that’s all stalled,” she said.

She expressed just as much concern about the potential impact of the funding freeze on a pair of smaller USDA grants funneled through her organization that support farm businesses by people starting out in agriculture. The two programs, for which the council is owed \$625,000, help beginning farmers with their business plans, direct them to funding sources and connect them with markets to sell their produce. Together, they’ve helped more than 100 farmers in Rhode Island, said Lynch.

“When that money dries up, this whole cohort of farmers, the new generation, will be slowed down in terms of their development,” she said.

Rhode Island is known to have a vibrant food culture that values locally grown products. People in the industry credit that support with an increase in the number of new farms in the state as well as an uptick in the amount of farmland counted in the latest Census of Agriculture. In both areas, Rhode Island bucked national trends of steady declines.

Rhode Island also sets itself apart with its number of people starting out in the industry. While the national average for beginning farmers, defined as anyone with 10 or fewer years of

farming experience, is 30%, the ratio in Rhode Island is the highest in the country, at 41.4%, meaning more new people are entering the industry, according to the 2022 census.

“We’re lucky we have that pipeline,” said Lynch. “We need to keep developing it.”

## **Funding for sustainable farming practices frozen**

Southside Community Land Trust is one of the organizations that supports beginning farmers.

At places like Urban Edge Farm, 30 acres in Cranston, it offers leases at low cost, something that’s especially important in Rhode Island, which has the most expensive farmland in the nation.

Southside was also contracted by the USDA under a \$350,000 contract to teach farmers sustainable practices that are largely aimed at protecting the health of the soil. It’s part of a program that was funded by the Inflation Reduction Act and fell under the umbrella of “climate-friendly agriculture.”

Funding for that program has stalled, and DeVos believes it’s because of the climate label, even though the techniques that are taught go back many decades, well before any policies around global warming.

“These are proven, best practices that everyone’s in agreement on to preserve healthy soils and produce stronger, better yields,” she said.

She estimates that Southside has had a total of \$150,000 of remaining grant money frozen. That includes the funding for the new electric heating system at Urban Edge Farm’s greenhouses. Without it, the farm and the 13 growers who use the greenhouses will have to continue using the dirtier, inefficient system.

DeVos said the increased costs to operate that system are ultimately passed on to consumers.

“Even if it is a little impact, it adds up, because our margins are so small,” she said.

Compounding the problems are layoffs at the USDA. Former staff members who were among the layoffs told The Journal that about 13 people lost their jobs at the Warwick office of the Natural Resources Conservation Service, an arm of the USDA. Neither R. Phou Vongkhamdy, state conservationist in charge of the office, nor the USDA commented on the layoffs.

DeVos said that one of the former employees was Southside's point of contact.

"It's not just that the money is frozen. It's that we can't get anyone on the phone," she said. "How are we going to produce food if our farmers are being subjected to this uncertainty?"

## **Payments under farm worker program also appear to be caught up**

McNiff, of Pat's Pastured, estimates that he has about \$300,000 in grant funding on hold.

Like others, that includes all the money he got from the Inflation Reduction Act, which he was given to upgrade his commercial kitchen and invest in a new tractor, among other things.

He's also still waiting on a \$100,000 reimbursement under the H-2A visa program that allows him to bring in workers from abroad for jobs that he can't fill with local people. He's hired six workers from Jamaica who are set to arrive next month. The money is aimed at helping defray the costs of accommodation and other expenses. He said he needs the workers and will have to absorb the costs if the federal money doesn't come through.

He understands that some may question why farmers qualify for federal support, but he says it's because the industry serves an essential purpose in getting food to people's tables. Rhode Island is especially difficult for farmers, he said, because of the cost of farmland, which is nearly five times the national average, among other challenges.

"Supposedly the administration said they wouldn't do anything to farmers, but it's not just us in Rhode Island," he said. "We've talked to ranchers in Montana who are feeling this. It's red states and blue states."

He believes the government must meet its obligations.

"We signed a contract. They signed a contract. We're just asking them to make good on the contract," he said.

*With staff reports from Jack Perry*

