

Senate Finance Committee

Deb Martone 271-4980

HB 246-FN-A, directing the state conservation committee to implement the conservation district climate resilience grant program and making an appropriation therefor.

Hearing Date: February 17, 2026

Time Opened: 1:43 p.m.

Time Closed: 2:13 p.m.

Members of the Committee Present: Senators Gray, Innis, Birdsell, Pearl, Lang, Rosenwald and Watters

Members of the Committee Absent: Senator Carson

Bill Analysis: This bill directs the state conservation committee to implement the conservation district climate resilience grant program and makes an appropriation therefor.

Sponsors:

Rep. J. Aron

Rep. Creighton

Rep. Ebel

Rep. Bixby

Rep. Parshall

Rep. B. Sullivan

Sen. Watters

Sen. Pearl

Who supports the bill: Please see Senate Finance Committee Legislative Aide, Deb Martone, for a complete listing of individuals in support of HB 246-FN-A.

Who opposes the bill: Julie Smith; Thomas Humphreys;

Who is neutral on the bill: Ian Hanley

Summary of testimony presented in support:

Representative Judy Aron, Prime Sponsor:

- HB 246-FN-A is requesting \$100,000 for the biennium ending June 30th. That would be split \$50,000 for this year and \$50,000 for the next year. The \$50,000 each year would be distributed among the 10 conservation districts in our state. That money would be used toward their grant programs, which help our agricultural communities.
- Representative Aron was sure a couple of members on the Finance Committee are aware of the great work conservation districts do, as well as the phenomenal job that is done by the grant programs themselves.
- Currently, they've been getting private donations and have been raising a lot of money for that purpose. But what they seek with this bill is to demonstrate to

those who are privately giving that the state supports these grant programs. Representative Aron thinks it will result in even more private donations.

- This is a really great investment. It's leveraged well and it helps these communities bring new, innovative ideas they can try in terms of dealing with all of the pressures farmers have to deal with, such as pest management and drought.
- HB 246-FN-A will go a very long way in helping our farming communities.
- Representative Aron does recognize the state has scarce dollars. Many organizations are asking for money. But this program is such a well run and well leveraged opportunity. It would be good to invest in this as a state.
- Senator Lang did some research on the climate resiliency program. He learned in June of 2025 the program had issued over \$337,000 in grants across all 10 counties. He inquired what the program's balance is currently. Representative Aron was unsure.

David Trumble:

- Mr. Trumble represents Good Earth Farm in Weare. He has been a certified organic farmer in New Hampshire for 40 years. They sell vegetables, seedlings, and fruit mostly direct to consumer. They have not participated in this program.
- As a farmer, Mr. Trumble can see firsthand the need for climate resilience programs. The droughts and heat waves farmers experience are much greater than they used to be. It used to be they would experience a typical four-week drought every summer. Now, that four-week drought is a six-week drought, followed by a week of thunderstorms and then another four-week drought. This makes farming nearly impossible to reach a high yield.
- Farmers need to have irrigation if they're going to maximize their potential.
- They are also finding much more rain is falling in any one given storm. One storm event will be responsible for about one-third of the soil erosion on a farm in any given year.
- With climate change there is more moisture in the air. Storms are more severe. There is more erosion. Farmers need to protect their fields as quickly as possible in the spring and throughout the summer.
- The types of equipment farmers might purchase with one of these grants could include no-till planters, field cultivators and silage tarps.
- Drip irrigation is totally necessary for vegetable farms. Without irrigation during the droughts, the yield would be one-third of what it would be if you had irrigation.
- By reducing erosion you are able to keep your organic matter up. When your organic matter goes up, you have better drought protection. If you can protect your soil, you have better drought protection.
- New Hampshire farms generate over 7,000 jobs per year, \$120 million per year in direct wages, and approximately \$70 million per year in tax revenue. If you take into account the multiplier effect, you're talking about one-half billion dollars in economic impact.
- It's been asked, "Why does the state have to buy this equipment for the farmers? Why can't they purchase it for themselves?" The answer is simple, young farmers starting out don't have enough money to capitalize their farms. It's a

very difficult business. You are lucky if you make \$20 an hour. It could take many years to be able to obtain the equipment needed to run a successful farm. Some may not make it. The state's appropriation in this bill would go a long way.

Benee Hershon, District Manager, Cheshire County Conservation District:

- While all 10 New Hampshire conservation districts are actively promoting and administering this program, the Cheshire Conservation District is the main administrator of the program. Cheshire County brings all of the conservation districts together to support the program annually.
- Since 2022 they have provided 139 grants directly to farms, for a total of over \$1 million in grants.
- This program is extremely important for so many reasons. If we want to have farm fresh food, and if we want to have food that is locally grown, we need to have farms that exist in our state.
- Since the last agricultural census, there has been a 10 percent decrease in farmland over the last decade.
- Our farms generate \$11.5 million in tax revenue per year. New Hampshire agriculture is generating a total of \$67.8 million in taxes as well.
- It is extremely expensive to run a farm in our state. There has been a 21 percent increase in the average expense over the last 5 years, and is projected to continue to climb.
- To get started as a young person in the field of agriculture is nearly impossible these days. But we do have many amazing farms throughout the state. Family farms who have been running for multiple generations in our state, but are struggling to continue to do so.
- Outside of growing nutrient-dense food for our communities, farms are also important for our tourism dollars. Folks come to our state to see the beautiful farmlands we have.
- They have been able to privately fund this program for a number of years. But last year they had to turn away 31 percent of applicants because they didn't have enough funding.
- This is an opportunity for the state to partner and leverage private dollars.
- Senator Pearl stated Cheshire County has a fairly robust equipment loan program. He asked if some of this money would be used toward purchasing equipment for farmers to access. Ms. Hershon replied it would. They always ensure the used equipment is in good shape, and that it is a sustainable, long-term investment. They also encourage farms they work with to purchase from local suppliers. Many of the folks they provide grant dollars to invest the money in other local New Hampshire businesses. They have had farmers buy equipment with a grant to improve their soil health. They've done irrigation projects as a response to drought. Senator Pearl asked Ms. Hershon to talk about the program criteria as far as what the farms have to look like, the size of the farms. He also asked her to elaborate on the grant process, the followup and the accountability for fall program. Ms. Hershon explained to apply for the grant you have to be selling direct to consumer for at least two years, to ensure they are in fact working with a farm. They utilize USDA definitions as to what a

farm is. They also want to ensure the farm is already successful. They open up the grant round in November with a lengthy application process. The grants are promoted starting in November and are due on February 1st. Throughout the grant process they offer informational sessions. Applications are submitted to each individual district's selection committee, who utilize a ranking matrix.

- Applicants must also submit proof of insurance. They have one year to successfully install and complete their projects.
- Workshops are offered throughout the state on an annual basis to encourage peer learning.
- Senator Pearl asked if Ms. Hershon knew what the average dollar value of the grant was. She replied the most a farmer can apply for is \$10,000. On average, they are all applying for the full amount.

Cara Carlos:

- Ms. Carlos' family owns a 70 acre farm in Alstead. In the past 5 years since they've owned the farm, Alstead has incurred millions of dollars in road damage due to severe weather events. They knew they needed to make some upgrades to their farm to keep it sustainable for years to come.
- Last year they received a climate resilience grant. As first generation farmers working to rehabilitate an antique farm property back to its glory, the support given to them by the conservation district has enabled them to plan and install durable and long-lasting infrastructure projects and upgrades they would not have been able to do on their own at such a pace.
- Their farm now has a solid foundation in the form of irrigation and pasture management, and they've been able to move forward with other projects. Their goal is to provide produce, goods, and services to their community.
- Ms. Carlos recently entered into an agreement with the local historical society to rehabilitate the town's general store. They will sell their products and act as a vendor for other local farmers and suppliers.
- By supporting this bill it helps to strengthen a cooperative network of farmers and crafts people who feed and enrich our communities.

Robert Traver:

- Mr. Traver is a member of the Sullivan County Conservation District. Very recently they spent time in committee reviewing six applicants for these climate resilience grants.
- These farmers contribute to local food supplies. Whole neighborhoods and communities also benefit from this program.
- There is a growers collective in Claremont with approximately 75 members. Many of them participate in providing food to the greater Claremont area.
- In New Hampshire a little over 3 percent of the food that we consume is grown here. In other words, we're 97 percent reliant on food coming from outside of the state. That is not all that different from the rest of New England, but it's not exactly a number to brag about.
- When you support farms and move more food directly into our local food systems, the state is moving from a more vulnerable to a less vulnerable food supply setup.

- For Mr. Traver as a taxpayer, the idea this resilience grant money is coming from private donations and might be leveraged by state funds, is music to his ears, That's something that could be bragged about as a model, or it's simply a good example of how state government can take advantage of partners on the outside.
- Senator Pearl asked how much private money is donated per year into the program. Mr. Traver indicated there are ten counties each receiving approximately \$40,000, making it about \$400,000. He didn't know for sure.

Laura Sokoloski:

- Ms. Sokoloski is a member of the Grafton County Committee and the Office Manager for the Grafton County Conservation District.
- HB 246-FN-A would provide a modest investment of state funds to increase the capacity of this program, and encourage private funding. It provides a way to bridge funding gaps for farmers.
- There is high overhead in farming, and young, new farmers have a ways to go before they're able to really get their hands dirty.
- In Grafton County they've funded projects for 12 different recipients on reducing soil erosion, buying equipment for that purpose, and improving soil fertility. They had a project with an irrigation pond for particular periods of drought.
- The program really is a way to encourage creative solutions to the specific challenges of each farmer. And by increasing the profitability and productivity of farmers, we see the direct benefits to the community. There are also indirect benefits such as educational workshops where farmers share these solutions directly with community members.

Neutral Information Presented:

Ian Hanley, Executive Director, New Hampshire State Conservation Committee:

- The State Conservation Committee is an administrative, statutory committee attached to the New Hampshire Department of Agriculture, Markets, and Food. It is charged with the oversight and facilitation of our state's 10 county conservation districts.
- This money would go to the State Conservation Committee, and then is distributed to the districts. As part of their statutory requirements, they ensure the districts have annual financial reporting requirements for compliance with state statutes.
- The county conservation districts represent the local input as to how agriculture and conservation is done. Most of our districts are working with the Natural Resource Conservation Service, which provides funding to farmers for voluntary conservation practices. The conservation districts represent the local counterbalance to those federal priorities. They are regularly working with them, ensuring local priorities are put into play.
- Currently, New Hampshire is one of the only states in the country that does not provide any funding to the conservation districts. This bill would be the first time any state level funds come to the conservation districts. The most they receive is administrative funding through the county.

- This is an amazing way for us to start showing a commitment to local food production.
- Senator Pearl asked if the conservation districts received ARPA funding a few years ago. Mr. Hanley replied they received \$580,000, which was used for
- rental equipment. Senator Pearl sought to confirm none of the ARPA money went into the Climate Resiliency Grant Program. Mr. Hanley agreed.
- Senator Watters stated the program needs funding Mr. Hanley agreed and indicated the rental equipment program is one of the highlights of our conservation district system. They receive inquiries from around the country on the rental equipment program. It is a gold standard program other states are looking to as an example. Senator Watters mentioned the solar for farmers program. Giving farmers another opportunity for resilience to sustain their power and to provide either powerful electric fencing or pumps is one of the most immediate ways some farmers can save money. Mr. Hanley explained the solar projects are an eligible application. But they are limited in the amount of total dollars within the program. They've seen a number of good, solar-based projects come through for solar pumps, as well as other kinds of resilient projects.

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Date Hearing Report completed: February 21, 2026