



MOFGA Testimony In Support Of
LD 1621 - *An Act Regarding Environmental Justice*
April 24, 2023

Good afternoon Senator Brenner, Representative Gramlich and members of the Joint Standing Committee on Environment & Natural Resources. My name is Heather Spalding and I am deputy director of the Maine Organic Farmers and Gardeners Association (MOFGA). I'm speaking in support of LD 1621 - *An Act Regarding Environmental Justice*.

A broad-based community, MOFGA is creating a food system that is healthy and fair for all of us. Through education, training and advocacy, we are helping farmers thrive, making more local, organic food available and building sustainable communities.

We thank House Speaker Rachel Talbot Ross for introducing LD 1621, which would require fair and equitable access to Department of Environmental Protection decision-making processes for environmental justice populations and frontline communities. I'd like to share some comments on environmental justice and agriculture. MOFGA believes in economic, environmental and social justice for all people involved in Maine's food system, including those most impacted by historic and present-day systemic oppression. We recognize that modern agriculture is built on unceded traditional indigenous lands through human exploitation, co-opted knowledge and contamination of our environment and natural resources, most often at the expense of historically disadvantaged people.

We are excited to see the final report of the Maine Climate Council Equity Subcommittee¹, which suggests that action steps should be prioritized in the following four community categories – low-income, rural, disadvantaged, and frontline – all of which are closely linked to Maine food and agriculture. We are pleased that the Department of Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry as well as the Joint Standing Committee on Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry and many other departments and committees are tackling social justice in various ways. Their efforts must dovetail with the actions of this committee, just as your work on PFAS has done. We hope that this bill ensures that Maine's environmental justice policies include preventing harm to communities from Maine's food and agriculture systems.

The National Young Farmers Coalition reports that 73% of young farmers have experienced at least one climate impact on their farm in the past year. And 88% percent of young farmers attribute changes in weather patterns they are experiencing on their farms to climate change. Many farmers in Maine are struggling with skyrocketing costs of production, a labor shortage, and dramatically shifting weather patterns, and are perilously close to going out of business. Many farmers report to us that they don't pay themselves what they pay their farm workers. Farm workers, in turn, are 4.5 times as likely to live in poverty in comparison to other Maine

¹ Final Recommendations of the Equity Subcommittee, Maine Climate Council. March 2023.



workers, with 25% of Maine farmworkers living in poverty. These workers carry out the physically demanding jobs in extreme weather conditions, and often with exposure to toxic pesticides. Many farm workers are undocumented, and ineligible for minimum wage, overtime and the opportunity to carry out collective bargaining with their employers to ensure that they don't bear the brunt of toxic and environmentally harmful farming practices, or the heavy toll that the climate is taking on agricultural systems.

As Maine works to transform its energy sector with renewable, clean power systems, we should ensure that low-income, rural, disadvantaged, and frontline communities have access to those systems, and are able to overcome the costs and enjoy the benefits.

Maine has set a goal of generating 30% of the food it consumes by the year 2030. Our environmental justice law should ensure that it's not only the privileged, high-income communities that have access to this local, fresh food.

Thank you and I would be happy to answer questions if you have any.

The Maine Organic Farmers and Gardeners Association (MOFGA) started in 1971 and is the oldest and largest state organic organization in the country. We're a broad-based community that educates about and advocates for organic agriculture, illuminating its interdependence with a healthy environment, local food production, and thriving communities. We have 15,000 members, we certify more than 500 organic farms and processing facilities representing \$90 million in sales, and we are working hard to provide training and create opportunities for Maine's next generation of farmers. Each of these farmers is a Maine businessperson for whom economic health and environmental health are interdependent. While MOFGA envisions a future of healthy ecosystems, communities, people and economies sustained by the practices of organic agriculture, we attribute our success to collaboration and outreach to growers across the management spectrum.