



MOFGA Testimony In Support Of  
LD 315 - *An Act to Provide Funding for Drought Relief and Other Programs  
Benefiting Maine Farmers*

February 13, 2023

Good morning Senator Ingwersen, Representative Pluecker and members of the Joint Standing Committee on Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry. My name is Heather Spalding and I am deputy director of the Maine Organic Farmers and Gardeners Association (MOFGA). 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.

I am speaking today in support of LD 315 - *An Act to Provide Funding for Drought Relief and Other Programs Benefiting Maine Farmers*.

This legislation would provide a one-time appropriation of \$35,000 for the Land Use Planning Commission to hire a consultant to review and overhaul the current applications to improve water withdrawal permitting. It also would provide ongoing funding for 3 full-time, permanent positions among the Land Use Planning Commission, the Department of Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry, and the Department of Environment Protection.

Climate change has put Maine farms and farmers in a precarious position. The Maine growing season is, on average, more than two weeks longer today than it was in 1950. While that may seem like a good thing for farmers hoping to stretch the production season as long as possible, it comes at a cost. Unpredictable frosts, severe weather events, and new pests and diseases are some of the climate-related challenges facing farmers in Maine. The past three growing seasons have posed significant drought challenges for farmers – 2020 bringing chaotic weather extremes, severe to extreme drought statewide, the hottest summer on record, and, paradoxically, the shortest growing season for some, due to late and early frosts. Unless dramatic course corrections are made rapidly, the climate crisis could risk the loss of upwards of 53% of Maine's agricultural jobs by 2050, according to one analysis performed by the Governor's Office of Policy Innovation and the Future (GOPIF).

Farmers, who generally enjoy sufficient rainfall and access to surface and groundwater, are not immune to the impacts of drought. Many reported that the extreme statewide drought of 2020 caused reduced crop quality, poor crop and cover crop germination, and increased labor needs associated with irrigation.



We hear regularly from farmers who would like to expand their water use for various purposes, including for irrigation, milk processing, and livestock watering. LD 315 would provide the technical assistance that farmers need in their decision making about water quality assessments, soil moisture monitoring, navigating surface and groundwater regulations, measuring the volume of water needed for agricultural purposes, and ensuring sufficient water access to meet production needs.

Sustainability needs to figure prominently in the drought program development, and we believe that continual improvement of soil health should be a guiding principle for all program efforts coordinated by the new positions. Dealing with PFAS contamination of farm water resources also must be a factor in the workplan of the new hires.

We appreciate the \$2 million capitalization of the state's drought relief fund that the DACF requested and Governor Mills included in the proposed state budget. Additionally, \$300,000 annually is projected for the fund for future years. This funding coupled with increased human resources to help Maine farmers respond to drought will be a huge help to Maine agriculture.

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

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*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.*