



**Comments of the Maine Organic Farmers and Gardeners Association
Regarding LD 210 - *An Act Making Unified Appropriations and Allocations from the General Fund and Other Funds for the Expenditures of State Government and Changing Certain Provisions of the Law Necessary to the Proper Operations of State Government for the Fiscal Years Ending June 30, 2025, June 30, 2026 and June 30, 2027***

February 27, 2025

Good morning Senator Rotundo, Representative Gattine, and members of the Appropriations and Financial Affairs Committee. My name is Heather Spalding and I'm deputy director of the Maine Organic Farmers and Gardeners Association (MOFGA).

A broad-based community, MOFGA is transforming our food system by supporting farmers, empowering people to feed their communities, and advocating for an organic future. MOFGA certifies 537 organic farms and processing operations representing more than \$120 million in sales. We're working hard to 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.

Investing in Maine's food and agriculture systems is critical for creating a vibrant and self-reliant future. We appreciate the commitment that this committee has demonstrated to Maine farmers and the consumers who rely on local, fresh and healthy foods. Though we rely on other states and countries to provide roughly 95% of the food we consume, Maine has the land base, water, soils, and the know-how to feed itself if we make strategic financial investments in ecologically sound agriculture. Maine has a goal of producing at least 30% of the food we consumer by 2030 and our Department of Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry needs significant financial support to help us get there.

The current threats to federal funding for Maine's agricultural programs is of great concern to us. The federal funding freeze in USDA payments includes a variety of innovative, science-based financial assistance programs and the timing of the confusion and freeze couldn't be worse. Many farmers don't have much income at this time of the year, and many are laying out a lot of cash to get equipment and supplies. We don't have a total figure frozen federal funds but we are hearing from many farmers who are struggling with cash flow due to the executive orders and ongoing uncertainty. Some farmers have hundreds of thousands of contracted federal dollars at risk. They're expecting the USDA to uphold their end of the contract. Despite USDA stating that some payments are moving forward, most of the farmers we're hearing from have not had their payments resumed. MOFGA programs also are impacted directly -- we have more than a million dollars in grant funding at risk representing 14 different contracts that provide direct technical and financial assistance for farmers.

The uncertainty coming from our federal government underscores the need for Maine to shore up its support for Maine agriculture.

Turning to the specifics of the proposed budget, we do understand that we are in more austere funding times than prior years, but we would like to highlight a few critical areas to protect and, if possible, find additional funding. MOFGA works closely with the Department of Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry and we know that they provide critical technical and financial support for our farmers and broad base of stakeholders. We



know that DACF is lean and effective and we support funding requests for its staff. Items I would like to highlight are: soil health, drought relief, PFAS elimination/mitigation, nutrition incentives, dairy, agricultural infrastructure and farmland protection:

- Soil Health - healthy soil is the basis of organic agriculture and it is absolutely critical for all farmers. We are thrilled that the Department of Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry houses this important state program and we need to ensure ongoing and expanded funding to help farmers get the technical assistance they need to farm successfully, especially in the dramatically changing weather patterns. We appreciate maintenance of \$500,000 in the Maine Healthy Soils Fund and appreciate the proposed ongoing baseline funding of at least \$100,000.
- Drought Relief - Maine farmers historically have enjoyed sufficient rainfall and access to surface and groundwater but that is changing and many report that extreme statewide drought in recent years has resulted in poor crop and cover crop germination, and increased labor needs associated with irrigation, and decreased yields. As with the soil health item above, we appreciate the maintenance of the \$300,000 for the Farmers Drought Relief Grant Program and the inclusion of ongoing baseline funding of at least \$100,000 for drought relief.
- PFAS elimination/mitigation - Maine's PFAS emergency fund is a success story that we all should be so proud of. It has helped so many impacted farmers pivot and stay in business. We strongly support inclusion of funds to establish a position to support the PFAS Fund. And generally, we want to encourage more funding for PFAS elimination and mitigation beyond the items specifically mentioned for the DACF budget.
- Nutrition Incentives - Maine's Farm Fresh Rewards and Harvest Bucks programs also are great success stories that provide much needed healthy local fresh foods for limited income families while providing a premium to the farmers who feed them. We strongly support the proposed baseline funding of \$600,000 for the Fund To Address Food Insecurity and Provide Nutrition Incentives.
- Dairy - The cost of producing milk in Maine has been rising steadily over the past 50 years, while the price that farmers receive for their milk has become increasingly volatile. We continue to lose farms due to this pricing instability. We strongly encourage continued investment in and protection of the Maine Milk Pool and Maine Dairy Relief Program, and the Maine Dairy Improvement Fund.
- Agricultural Infrastructure - We appreciate the \$147,000 funding for staffing in the Maine Agriculture, Food and Forest Products Investment Fund Other Special Revenue Funds account. MOFGA recently released an economic impact report that affirmed that purchasing or building agricultural infrastructure is a top production goal among our farmers.
- Farmland Protection - We appreciate funding for the Land for Maine's Future program and we would like to see funding specifically for the Working Farmland Access and Protection Program.

Recent census data is sobering, indicating continued farm decline in the U.S. and a 7.4% decline in the number of farms in Maine. This reflects the disruption that farmers have experienced in recent years due to the Pandemic, escalating costs of production, labor and housing shortages, dramatically shifting weather patterns, geopolitical unrest, and increasing consolidation of agribusiness. Now the federal government is creating even more uncertainty. All of this underscores the need for further investment in Maine's food and agriculture system so that farmers are not getting squeezed at every corner, so that farming is restored to a viable and vibrant livelihood throughout our state, and so that all Maine people can have access to local, healthy foods on their tables each day.

As you work through the budget we urge you to consider how important agriculture is to our state – our culture, our economy and our environment. Increasing local production of and markets for Maine farm products will be a vehicle for helping Maine become healthier and more self-reliant, and for achieving the goals of our Climate Action Plan.