MAINE FARMLAND TRUST

Testimony of Ellen Stern Griswold, Policy and Research Director, Maine Farmland Trust, before the 130th Legislature's Joint Standing Committee on Energy, Utilities and Technology

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Good morning Senator Lawrence, Representative Berry, and members of the Joint Standing Committee on Energy, Utilities, and Technology. My name is Ellen Griswold, and I am testifying on behalf of Maine Farmland Trust (MFT) neither for nor against LD 1710 – *An Act To Require Prompt and Effective Use of the Renewable Energy Resources of Northern Maine*.

MFT is a member-powered statewide organization that works to protect farmland, support farmers, and advance the future of farming. Since our founding in 1999, MFT has helped to permanently protect nearly 300 farms and keep over 60,000 acres of farmland in farming, while supporting over 800 farm families with a range of services. Our four main program areas are Farmland Protection, Farmland Access, Farm Viability in the form of business planning and technical assistance to help farmers become and remain economically viable, and Public Outreach and Policy to grow the future of farming in Maine. Protecting farmland in Maine is a principal part of our mission because we believe it is essential for ensuring that we have the land base to grow our agricultural economy, particularly as more farmers reach retirement age and development pressures increase across the state. Protecting land is also a key natural climate solution by avoiding the greater emissions associated with developed land, by ensuring we have the farmland needed to grow our local and regional food economy and create greater food security for our state, and by preserving the climate benefits that can result from farmers using climate smart practices on the land.

Agriculture is a key component of Maine's economy, contributing over $3.6 billion in economic impact and supporting over 27,000 jobs statewide.[1] But unfortunately, Maine's farmland, the foundation of our state's agricultural economy, is a precious and limited resource. According to the 2017 USDA Census of Agriculture, between 2012 and 2017 Maine lost 10% of its farmland – that is over 145,000 acres of woodland, pastureland, and cropland.[2]

MFT supports solar energy production on farms as long as it does not significantly diminish the potential for agricultural production. MFT understands the importance of solar energy production for addressing climate change, and we have appreciated being a part of the Maine Climate Council's

[1] Farm Credit East, "Northeast Economic Engine: Agriculture, Forest Products and Commercial Fishing," (2020), , available at: https://www.farmcrediteast.com/knowledge-exchange/Reports/2020%20Northeast%20Economic%20Engine.

[2] In 2012, Maine had 1,454,104 acres in farmland, but by 2017 that number had dropped to 1,307,566 acres – a loss of 146,491 acres or 10% of Maine's farmland. United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), National Agricultural Statistics Service (NASS), *U.S. Census of Agriculture for 2017*, Maine, https://www.nass.usda.gov/Publications/AgCensus/2017/Full_Report/Volume_1,_Chapter_1_State_Level/Maine/mev1.pdf.

Natural and Working Lands Working Group. We also understand that on-site solar projects can support the economic viability of a farm operation and reduce energy costs. But we must ensure that solar development in the state does not result in the loss of important agricultural lands or impede farmers' ability to access the land they need for their operations. We believe solar generation and agriculture can co-exist in Maine in a mutually beneficial manner as long as solar siting is structured to ensure the appropriate balance of these important interests.

LD 1710 would create the Northern Maine Renewable Energy Development Program to promote the development of substantial renewable energy resources in northern Maine. Specifically, LD 1710 would direct the Maine Public Utilities Commission (PUC) to issue a request for proposals for the construction and development of a new transmission line to connect renewable energy resources in northern Maine with the ISO-New England system, as well as initiate a new round of procurement for the development of renewable energy projects in northern Maine. MFT appreciates the leadership of Senate President Jackson in sponsoring LD 1710 to encourage the development of renewable energy resources in northern Maine to help the state meet its climate goals, and to remove some of the barriers that prevent renewable energy development in the northern portion of the state. However, MFT cannot support LD 1710 unless the language is amended to include greater consideration of the siting of the proposed transmission line and renewable energy projects as part of the evaluation process.

As renewable energy development has increased in the state, so too has our understanding of the impacts that these projects could have on the amount of farmland taken out of agricultural production, the loss of important agricultural soils, and the competition for land that farmers, particularly beginning farmers, need to lease in order to support their operations. It is for this reason that we were thrilled to see the inclusion in the state's climate action plan of the recommendation that the state "[d]evelop policies by 2022 to ensure renewable energy project siting is streamlined and transparent while seeking to minimize impacts on natural and working lands and engaging key stakeholders."

In order to further the balance contemplated by this climate action plan recommendation, MFT recommends making several changes to the language of LD 1710. First, MFT recommends adding the use of existing utility corridors and roads to the evaluation criteria contained in subsection 2, paragraph B and removing the "wherever feasible" clause contained in subsection 2, paragraph C. These changes would ensure that there is a strong preference for proposals that are collocated with existing utility corridors and roads, and as such, avoid further impacts to important natural and working lands.

Second, MFT also recommends the addition of site location elements into the bid evaluation criteria contained in subsection 3, paragraph C to guide the selection of projects by giving additional weight to projects that avoid or minimize natural resources impacts. The inclusion of siting criteria would build upon the precedent of the 2019 solar bill LD 1711 – *An Act To Promote Solar Energy Projects and Distributed Generation Resources in Maine* – which required the PUC to give preference to projects located on "previously developed or impacted land" in conducting procurements for distributed generation resources, and led to the creation of additional siting criteria. In addition, the Governor's Energy Office and the Maine Department of Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry will be convening a solar siting working group to develop by the end of this year recommendations that incentivize the siting of solar energy projects that minimize impacts on natural and working lands.

The recommendations from this working group could be used to inform the siting criteria that are included in the bid evaluation process.

For all of these reasons, MFT urges the Committee to adopt the proposed changes and ensure that renewable energy generation and agriculture co-exist in Maine in a mutually beneficial manner.