



**Testimony of Abby Farnham, Senior Policy and Research Associate, Maine Farmland Trust, to the 131<sup>st</sup> Legislature's Joint Standing Committee on Appropriations and Financial Affairs and Joint Standing Committee on Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry  
March 3, 2023**

Good afternoon Senator Rotundo, Representative Sachs, and members of both the Joint Standing Committee on Appropriations and Financial Affairs and the Joint Standing Committee on Agriculture, Conservation, and Forestry. My name is Abby Farnham and I am testifying today on behalf of Maine Farmland Trust (MFT) in support of the Maine Department of Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry's (DACF) Bureau of Agriculture requests within LD 258—*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, 2023, June 30, 2024 and June 30, 2025.*

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 more than 330 farms and keep nearly 60,000 acres of farmland in farming. In 2022 alone, MFT supported 48 farm businesses with workshops, technical assistance, and grants – delivering over 680 hours of technical assistance and \$309,000 in business and seed grants to help businesses grow their profitability. Our main program areas are Farmland Protection, Farmland Access, Stewardship, Farm Business Planning, PFAS Support, Climate Resilience, and Policy and Research.

MFT understands that climate change is one of the most daunting challenges of our time, and will have significant impacts on Maine's agricultural sector. Maine farmers are already experiencing climate change impacts, and are needing to adapt to the increasing frequency of extreme weather events, including excessive precipitation and drought. Protecting soils and building soil health are important climate mitigation and adaptation strategies. We are very excited to support proposed funding for the **Maine Healthy Soils Program**, a program MFT helped to champion in 2021, and the **Farmers Drought Relief Program**, both of which will help farmers become more resilient to climate change impacts and support their ability to run viable businesses in these unpredictable conditions. These important programs were established because of their vital role in the resilience of Maine's agricultural sector, but they have not yet been fully set up or implemented due to a lack of funding.

1. **Maine Healthy Soils Program** - This program creates a hub for critical information, tools, and assistance to help more Maine farms use practices to build soil health and benefit from the climate change resilience and mitigation as well as the economic benefits that healthy soils can provide. The proposed funding for this program includes \$3 million for FY 2023-24.
2. **Farmers Drought Relief Grant Program** - This program would help alleviate risks associated with drought conditions by providing farmers with grants to establish a sustainable and affordable source for irrigation water. This funding would provide essential support to Maine farmers as they adapt in the face of climate impacts that are already affecting their livelihoods. The proposed funding for this program includes \$2 million in FY 2023-24.

MFT supports robust funding for these two programs, which is critical to their ability to meet the needs of Maine's farming community, support the state's agricultural economy, and advance the agricultural goals contained in the State's updated climate action plan.

There are two items that are not in the proposed biennial budget that we believe are critically needed for farmers in Maine and want to raise for this group's consideration. We hope that these urgent needs can be considered as the budget is further refined.

First, the **Maine dairy sector is in an acute crisis and needs emergency relief funding**. Since 2017, Maine has lost 122 dairy farms, and the Maine Milk Commission recently reported to the ACF Committee that many more dairy farms are perilously close to going out of business. We were glad to see the inclusion of the Maine Milk Commission Study in the approved supplemental budget, but more needs to be done, urgently, before more Maine dairies are forced to close. Costs of production have skyrocketed due to dramatic increases in grain and energy costs, a decreased labor pool, and supply chain disruptions. Farmers have not received Tier Program payments over the past 13 months because milk payment prices have exceeded the outdated cost of production rates that are established in statute. It is critical that emergency relief funding reaches Maine dairy farmers for income losses they've already incurred so that they are able to stay in business. Dairy farms are often described as "anchor farms" because they provide the necessary threshold of business for veterinarians, feed suppliers, and machine suppliers to set up shop in the towns containing these farms. In doing so, these dairy farms contribute to the success of farms of all types and sizes. Providing emergency relief for dairy farms is therefore important for Maine's entire agricultural sector and for rural communities across the state.

Another item that is not in the proposed budget, but that we recognize **the need for is a solar-focused staff position at DACF**. As renewable energy development has increased in the state, so too has our understanding of the impacts that these projects can have on the amount of farmland taken out of agricultural production, the loss of important agricultural soils, and the competition for land that farmers need to lease in order to support their operations. MFT believes that solar generation and agriculture can co-exist symbiotically in Maine as long as solar siting is structured to balance these important interests. We suggest a new staff position at DACF to help promote the coexistence of solar development and agriculture. This position could share resources, respond to questions and concerns from farmers, and provide guidance to municipalities on solar ordinance development. Additionally, as legislation hopefully moves forward to implement a dual-use pilot program to study and create uniform standards for this type of solar development, as was recommended by the State's Agricultural Solar Siting Stakeholder Group, this position could help plan for and analyze the results of that pilot so that dual-use projects that support the coexistence of solar expansion and agriculture in Maine can be expanded throughout the state.

All of the initiatives discussed above would contribute to the economic viability of Maine's agricultural sector. Given that agriculture is a key component of Maine's economy, contributing over \$3.6 billion in economic impact and supporting over 27,000 jobs statewide,<sup>1</sup> providing support for Maine's agricultural sector is an important step towards solidifying a critical segment of Maine's economy.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today to share our support of LD 258 as well as some additional ideas. I'm happy to answer any questions you may have.

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<sup>1</sup> Farm Credit East, "Northeast Economic Engine: Agriculture, Forest Products and Commercial Fishing," (2020), available at: [www.farmcrediteast.com/resources/Industry-Trends-and-Outlooks/Reports/2020-Northeast-Economic-Engine#2020economicengine](http://www.farmcrediteast.com/resources/Industry-Trends-and-Outlooks/Reports/2020-Northeast-Economic-Engine#2020economicengine)