

Helen Poertner
Bar Harbor, ME
LD 1274

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Chair Ingwersen and Chair Pluecker and the distinguished members of the Committee On Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry

My name is Helen Poertner, I live in Bar Harbor, Maine and I am a farmer. I'm here today with Maine Youth Power, youth-led, youth movement, throughout rural and suburban Maine fighting to win human dignity, equity and a livable future for all. I am here today to ask that you support Senator Hickman's Bill LD 1274 An Act to Increase Land Access for Historically Disadvantaged Populations.

I came to Maine four years ago and fell in love with farming here. I think that this bill is an opportunity for the State of Maine to start doing justice to the communities that have experienced decades of racism, in all aspects of life and especially in policies by the US Department of Agriculture.

As a young farmer without a farming background in my family, I know how hard it is to start my own farm, as well as access resources to learn the many skills of farming. Farmland access is the key issue in prohibiting people from starting their own small-scale farms, which are the future of our global food system, as well as our food system in Maine. This is hard for everyone but especially challenging for historically disadvantaged populations whose access to farmland has been destroyed by racist USDA policies, as well as the legacy of slavery that makes it a lot less likely for Black Mainers to have access to intergenerational wealth to buy or lease land.

Further, a community's ability to grow and eat culturally appropriate food is important for its members to thrive. It gives people agency over their own lives and the empowerment to tell their own stories and build their communities the way they want to. In a state that has such a large majority of white people, access to these opportunities is especially important. Again, access to land to grow culturally appropriate food is at the center of this effort.

I've loved learning to farm in Maine, and I have deeply appreciated the support networks that exist. However, I barely share conference and training spaces with Black people. This is not because Black people don't want to farm but because there are stark racist barriers in the way of their success that white farmers don't face. Small-scale farms, like we have so many in Maine, are the future of our food system and our only sustainable option in the face of the climate crisis. Maine has a responsibility to grant Black farmers access to land to include everyone in the future of getting food on our tables.

Members of the Committee On Agriculture, Conservation, and Forestry, I urge you to support LD 1274, An Act to Increase Land Access for Historically Disadvantaged Populations.

Thank you for listening.