



MOFGA Testimony In Support Of

LD 1274 - *An Act to Increase Land Access for Historically Disadvantaged Populations*

The Black Farmer Restoration Program Act

April 3, 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. MOFGA certifies 535 organic farms and processing operations representing roughly \$90 million in sales and we are 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.

MOFGA supports LD 1274 – *The Black Farmer Restoration Program Act*, which would support Black farmers and to encourage the growth of Black farmers in the field of agriculture through agricultural land grants. It would establish a fund to buy easements on farmland for the purpose of granting land to Black farmers, and it would create a Farm Conservation Corps to help train the next generation of Maine's Black farmers. The efforts would be managed by the Department of Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry. We recognize and respect that the bill specifically intends to prioritize socially disadvantaged Black individuals who were born in Maine and have at least one parent of African ancestry. This legislation would make a big step forward in addressing policy recommendations of an important report to this Committee from last year.¹

MOFGA acknowledges that modern agriculture is built on unceded traditional indigenous lands, and descends from a tragic record of human exploitation and co-opted knowledge. This trauma is not a distant nightmare of our nation's or our state's past. We know from the \$1 billion settlement of the class action lawsuit against the US Department of Agriculture, *Pigford v. Glickman* in 1999, that racial discrimination against African-American farmers has been rampant. Payments were made to more than 13,300 farmers under the settlement's decree. A second appropriation of \$1.2 billion was appropriated for additional claims relating to that case.

¹ *Land Access For Indigenous & African American Farmers in Maine*. Report to the Maine Legislature's Joint Standing Committee on Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry. February 2022. <https://legislature.maine.gov/doc/8225>



We know that Maine also has a record of significant harm perpetrated on Black communities. One tragic example is the 1912 forced eviction of a mixed-raced fishing community on Malaga Island, off the coast of Phippsburg, because people thought the people of color were a blight on the Maine coastline. The state placed eight Malaga residents in the Maine School for the Feeble-Minded, razed homes and disinterred those buried in graveyards.

As our society works to address systemic racism, we must examine what may linger out of plain sight here in Maine. The loss of farmland by Black farm families in our country is shameful. We know that Black farmers in the United States lost acreage valuing roughly \$326 billion during the 20th century.² U.S. Census data shows that in the early 1900s Black farmers held more than 16 million acres of land but a century later that figure had dropped to under 5 million acres. The loss of land was a result of racist lending policies administered by the U.S. Department of Agriculture, including forced sales of co-owned land called heirs' property.

U.S. Secretary of Agriculture Tom Vilsack said, "The truth is, the deck has been stacked against Black farmers who for generations have been denied access to land and capital."

We do not have current data about Black farmers born in the territory we now call Maine. US Agricultural Census data does not distinguish between farmland ownership by Black farmers born in the U.S. and farmland ownership of recent Black refugees and immigrants. This legislation seeks to enhance access to resources for Black farmers who were born in Maine as they have not benefitted equally from resources and funding extended to BIPOC farmers who have relocated to Maine.

As this Committee is well aware, especially during times like these of economic volatility, farmland is wealth. When a population loses its land it falls further behind economically and has a much more difficult time recovering and creating opportunity for itself. This legislation would provide a hand up for historically disadvantaged communities that want to help build a healthy and sustainable food system for Maine.

Maine's housing and labor shortages are two sides of the same coin when it comes to farming. We appreciate that this legislation considers both sides. Providing flexibility for grant recipients to create farm housing on the land is critical, and providing necessary training through apprenticeships also is essential. Apprenticeship and beginning farmer training have been hallmark programs of MOFGA's since we started back in 1971. Many of our former apprentices are now running successful farms of their own and training future farmers. This model works and would be a really important part of the Black Farmer Restoration Program.

As a white-led organization, we know that we must be explicit and transparent about how we are working towards our commitments to social justice. We believe in economic, environmental and social justice for all people involved in Maine's food system, including those most impacted by historic and present-day systemic oppression including white supremacy, colonization and

² [U.S. Black farmers lost \\$326 bln worth of land in 20th century -study](#). Reuters. May 2, 2022.

extractive capitalism. We must listen, learn and support the resilient and strong communities that we believe the organic movement must represent. We know we have a lot to learn and we want to support the leadership of Maine's Black farmers who are advocating for this legislation. We thank Senator Craig Hickman for his tireless and bold efforts to make things right. As MOFGA works to educate itself and correct mistakes of our past, we are:

- Listening to feedback and engaging stakeholders
- Continuing co-learning and education about privilege, bias and discrimination for MOFGA's staff and board, and the wider community
- Ensuring diversity, equity and inclusion goals are in all staff work plans and our organization's impact plan
- Sharing our platforms to lift up historically disadvantaged voices
- Exploring both state and federal policy to support our equity and justice goals including policies that support workers' rights, food sovereignty and land access
- Decolonizing our educational programs, including sharing the origin of many organic principles that have roots in BIPOC communities
- Reducing barriers to organic certification
- Using farming programs as a tool to help farmers overcome barriers such as access to land, capital and education
- Improving the accessibility of workshops through expanded scholarship and registration options
- Building relationships and supporting partner organizations that are led by BIPOC and other marginalized people
- Integrating options for land reparations into speakers' honorariums

We know that this Committee shares MOFGA's commitment to creating a food and agriculture system that is fair and healthy for all Mainers, and we hope you will support this legislation to bring justice and equity to Maine's Black farmers.

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

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.