

Testimony of Jim Hanna of Portland in **Support** of LD 1274, An Act to Increase Land Access for Historically Disadvantaged Populations

Honorable Senator Ingwersen, Representative Pluecker, and members of the Committee on Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry

As Executive Director of the Cumberland County Food Security Council (CCFSC), I represent a diverse food system coalition that agrees our country's history of dispossession and inequitable access to land is at the root of poverty and food insecurity.

Today, Black and Afro indigenous farmers operate in a food system built on a foundation of hundreds of years of oppressive economic practices and complicit agricultural institutions. These entities continue to operate in ways that exploit labor and cause suffering, particularly among historically disadvantaged people. The pervasive and interconnected laws, biases, and practices that have been limiting our collective potential cannot be undone with a few policy changes. To transform systems, we must reveal the flawed structures at their foundation and redesign our communities in ways that fundamentally transform the racial inequity that African Americans and other communities of color have suffered throughout U.S. history. We need to embed racial equity intentionally in every aspect of our society, including programs designed to support socially disadvantaged farmers.

That said, LD 1274 provides good foundation stones on which to build alternative structures that support farmers being able to participate in an equitable and just food system. Sustainable land access is critical for any farmer committed to feed her or his community. Providing opportunities for hands on farming experience through a service corps or apprenticeship, if designed well, can provide low barrier entry for aspiring agriculturalists who may have no other way to test their dreams and aspirations.

In 2002, I founded the New American Sustainable Agriculture Project at Coastal Enterprises, Inc. Working with mostly Somali refugees and Latino farmworkers, we established an incubator for the development of farm enterprises. During that time I met Muhidin Libah and would later work with him to design the farming program of the Somali Bantu community now farming in Wales. The biggest challenge to these farmer support initiatives is sustainable land access.

I was part of the team that prepared [the report](#) in response to LD 870: Resolve, Directing the Permanent Commission on the Status of Racial, Indigenous and Maine Tribal Populations To Study the Impact of Policies Regarding Agriculture, Access to Land, Access to Grants and Access to Financing on African-American and Indigenous Farmers in the State. Our work developed recommendations including increasing land access for historically disadvantaged people, specifically, "Black or African American and Wabanaki people".

One emergent challenge to supportive policy development is that many cultivators self identify in ways that diverge from simple classification developed for data collection purposes. For example, the USDA Agriculture Census defines a category of producer as "Black or African American." It does not distinguish whether these farmers are US born or immigrants from African recently arriving in Maine. As we observe the percentage of Black farmers increase in the census over the past 20 years, these subtle distinctions in the data can have significant impact on policy development and the design of effective programs.

Currently, I am working with a farmer in Turner, Dawud Ummah, who identifies as Afro Indigenous. We are developing a whole farm incubator that has a focus on developing animal husbandry skills with historically disadvantaged ranchers. This emerging project fills a critical gap in existing farmer incubator programs. Once these aspiring ranchers have the skills base to succeed on their own, they will need to have a place to transition their enterprise from the the Ummah Farm Food Hub.

LD 1274 takes steps toward healing a food system that leaves too many farmers broke and exhausted and too many eaters without adequate nourishing food. If Maine can grant land access for food production to historically disadvantaged farmers, it will be an investment in our agricultural economy that will serve us all for many generations.

Jim Hanna
Cumberland County Food Security Council
LD 1274

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