



**Testimony of Shelley Megquier, Policy & Research Director, Maine Farmland Trust, to the  
131<sup>st</sup> Legislature's Joint Standing Committee on Environment and Natural Resources  
May 15, 2023**

Dear Senator Brenner, Representative Gramlich, and members of the Joint Standing Committee on Environment and Natural Resources:

My name is Shelley Megquier and I am the Policy & Research Director at Maine Farmland Trust (MFT). I am providing testimony on behalf of MFT in support of LD 54 – *An Act to Require Compliance with Natural or Agricultural Resource Protection Ordinances*.

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. Our Farm Network includes over 500 farms and, in 2022, 2,250+ individuals demonstrated their commitment to the future of Maine agriculture through an MFT membership. In 2022, 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 is very sensitive to the need for more affordable housing in our state—this need is critical in all communities across Maine. Increased affordable housing opportunities are also important to the viability of Maine's agricultural sector, as the lack of available affordable housing, particularly in rural parts of the state, is contributing to the challenges Maine farmers are experiencing with labor supply and retention. As our state and municipalities work to advance needed policy and planning solutions to our affordable housing crisis, MFT wants to ensure that the need to protect our state's critical agricultural resources is also prioritized.

Protecting farmland in Maine 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 providing the land base 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. However, Maine's farmland is a precious and limited resource. The 2017 Census of Agriculture showed that between 2012 and 2017, Maine lost more than 10 percent of its farmland, over 146,000 acres<sup>1</sup>—

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<sup>1</sup> 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*,

making Maine one of the top five states in the country with the highest percentage of farmland lost, according to American Farmland Trust.<sup>2</sup> Maine's farmland is at risk from all types of development, including low-density residential development, which fragments the agricultural land base and threatens the viability of an area's remaining working farms.<sup>3</sup>

LD 54 requires that future housing development complies with enacted municipal ordinances designed to protect natural and agricultural resources. MFT supports this effort to uphold municipal ordinances designed to protect natural and agricultural resources. Many municipalities across Maine recognize both the benefits of and threats to agriculture in their communities, and have identified farmland protection and support for farms as priorities in their comprehensive plans. It is important for towns to have a range of policy and planning tools available to them to advance these priorities, including zoning ordinances enacted to protect important farmland soils and working agricultural lands as well as the viability of farm businesses. Further, the application of smart growth principles that reduce sprawl and balance the need for additional housing, particularly affordable housing, with the need to protect our state's working farms and agricultural land is essential for increasing affordable housing opportunities in ways that also ensure we have the land base needed to grow our agricultural economy and create greater food security for our state.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony in support of LD 54. I'm happy to answer any questions you may have.

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[https://www.nass.usda.gov/Publications/AgCensus/2017/Full\\_Report/Volume\\_1,\\_Chapter\\_1\\_State\\_Level/Maine/mev1.pdf](https://www.nass.usda.gov/Publications/AgCensus/2017/Full_Report/Volume_1,_Chapter_1_State_Level/Maine/mev1.pdf).

<sup>2</sup> American Farmland Trust, "2017 Census of Agriculture," <https://farmlandinfo.org/2017-census-of-agriculture/>

<sup>3</sup> American Farmland Trust, (2020) *Farms Under Threat: The State of the States*, "Agricultural Land Conversion Highlight Summary: Maine."