



**Testimony of Abby Farnham, Assistant Director of Policy and Research, Maine Farmland Trust, to the 131st Legislature's Joint Standing Committee on Energy, Utilities and Technology
February 20, 2024**

Good afternoon Senator Lawrence, Representative Zeigler, and members of the Joint Standing Committee on Energy, Utilities and Technology. My name is Abby Farnham and I am testifying today on behalf of Maine Farmland Trust (MFT) neither for nor against LD 2205, *Resolve, to Require the Public Utilities Commission to Initiate a Feasibility Study to Evaluate Transmission Technologies and Siting Locations for Any Future Electric Transmission Line Proposed Pursuant to the Northern Maine Renewable Energy Development Program*.

MFT is a member-powered statewide organization that works to protect farmland, support farmers, and advance the future of farming. Our goal is to keep agricultural lands working and help farmers and their communities thrive. 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 2023, MFT supported 58 farm businesses with workshops, technical assistance, and grants – delivering over 600 hours of technical assistance and \$197,000 in business and seed grants to help businesses grow their profitability.

Maine's working farmland and farm businesses create diverse and far-reaching benefits for communities across the state, including serving as economic development engines for rural communities, strengthening resilience to climate change, bolstering food security, providing habitat needed to sustain wildlife, creating access to a variety of recreational pursuits, and contributing to Maine's valued sense of rural character.

Agriculture is also a key component of Maine's economy, contributing over \$3.6 billion in economic impact and supporting over 27,000 jobs statewide,¹ and farms and farmland play a critical role in advancing the state's climate action goals. Maine's 2020 climate action plan, *Maine Won't Wait*, established the goals to increase both the amount of Maine-produced food consumed in the state and the total amount of land conserved statewide to 30 percent by 2030, with farmland protection sub-goals soon to be determined.²

At the same time, agriculture in Maine is facing significant challenges, ranging from rising costs of land and production to increased development pressure, which threaten the viability of farm businesses and the land base on which they rely. The recently released 2022 Census of

¹ Farm Credit East, *Northeast Economic Engine: Agriculture, Forest Products and Commercial Fishing*, p. 9 (2020), available at: www.farmcrediteast.com/resources/Industry-Trends-and-Outlooks/Reports/2020-Northeast-Economic-Engine#2020economicengine.

² Maine Climate Council, *Maine Won't Wait: A Four-Year Plan for Climate Action*, p. 66 and p. 76 (2020), available at: www.maine.gov/climateplan/

Agriculture showed a further reduction in both the number of farms and the amount of farmland in Maine.³

MFT understands the importance of increased renewable energy generation for addressing climate change and meeting the goals of our state’s climate action plan, and since farms and farmland also play an important role in meeting these goals, we believe it is essential to advance policy solutions that support the expansion of renewable energy development in ways that avoid and minimize impacts to working farmland and farm businesses.

LD 2205 would require a feasibility study to be conducted for any future transmission line to be developed through the Northern Maine Renewable Energy Development Program before a new request for proposals on the transmission line can be issued. MFT supports a more comprehensive and thoughtful approach to renewable energy development planning and siting in Maine, and we believe it is important that any effort that moves forward related to the siting of a future transmission line, whether through the study envisioned by this bill or through other processes, ensure strong evaluation and consideration of impacts to farmland, to the viability of farm businesses, and to the agricultural uses of the land, including for agricultural operations that rely on leased land.

We also strongly recommend that this bill and/or other related transmission line planning efforts that move forward ensure greater consideration and prioritization of collocating the proposed transmission line with existing utility corridors and roads through the siting and evaluation process. This was a primary recommendation made by MFT and other stakeholders when LD 1710—which established the Northern Maine Renewable Energy Development Program and directed the PUC to issue a request for proposals for the construction and development of a new transmission line—was being considered by this committee during the last Legislature. The use of existing utility corridors and roads would help to ensure that siting of a future transmission line avoids impacts to Maine’s essential farmland and farm businesses.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide comments today.

³ Between 2022 and 2017, Maine lost an additional 564 farms and 82,567 acres of farmland. United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), National Agricultural Statistics Service (NASS), *Census of Agriculture for 2022, Maine*, “Historical Highlights: 2022 and 2017.”