



MAINE FARMLAND TRUST

Testimony of Shelley Megquier, Policy and Research Director, Maine Farmland Trust, before the 131st Legislature's Joint Standing Committee on Judiciary

February 29, 2024

Good afternoon Senator Carney, Representative Moonen, and members of the Joint Standing Committee on Judiciary. My name is Shelley Megquier and I am submitting testimony behalf of Maine Farmland Trust (MFT) in support of LD 2007 – *An Act to Advance Self-determination for Wabanaki Nations*.

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 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.

Our goal is to keep agricultural lands working and help farmers and their communities thrive. MFT believes that equitable access to land and the ability to produce food as well as fair distribution of and access to resources are key to the future of farming in Maine. MFT supports LD 2007 because restoring the inherent rights of Wabanaki Tribes to self-govern will advance fairness and equity for Tribal communities in Maine and strengthen the capacity of the Wabanaki Nations to create greater economic opportunities for the Tribes and surrounding non-tribal communities of rural Maine.

Farms are a key component of rural economic development in Maine, and, in return, farms are more successful when the communities and regions in which they are located have robust and resilient local economies. In addition to our belief that restoring the inherent rights of Wabanaki Tribes to self-govern will advance fairness and equity, MFT supports LD 2007 based on our understanding that Wabanaki Nations' ability to thrive economically will have positive impacts that extend to rural communities across Maine including farming communities. The 2022 report *Economic and Social Impacts of Restrictions on the Applicability of Federal Indian Policies to the Wabanaki Nations in Maine*, prepared by the Harvard Project on American Indian Economic Development, makes clear that the restrictions imposed by the 1980 Maine Indian Claims Settlement Act (MICSA) have inhibited the Wabanaki Nations from achieving greater economic growth and being the driver of economic development for their communities and surrounding regions, as has been experienced by the other 570 federal tribes over the past 40 years which have had full access to federal policies of self-determination.¹ The 2022 report from the Harvard Project on American Indian Economic Development estimated that restoring

¹ Kalt, J. P., Medford, A. B., and Taylor, J. B., Ash Center for Democratic Governance and Innovation, Harvard Kennedy School, Harvard University, *Economic and Social Impacts of Restrictions on the Applicability of Federal Indian Policies to the Wabanaki Nations in Maine*, p. 54 (Dec 2022), available at: <https://ash.harvard.edu/publications/economic-and-social-impacts-restrictions-applicability-federal-indian-policies>.

self-governance capabilities for the Wabanaki Nations would result in the direct and indirect addition of more than 2,700 new jobs and an estimated \$330 million each year to Maine's GDP – with the benefits of this growth concentrated in rural portions of the state including Aroostook, Penobscot, and Washington counties.²

LD 2007 would implement many of the 22 changes to MICSA that were recommended by a bipartisan task force, and in doing so, ensure that the Passamaquoddy Tribe, the Penobscot Nation, the Mi'kmaq Nation, and the Houlton Band of Maliseet Indians enjoy the same rights and authority as other federally-recognized Indian Tribes across the country. These recommendations include removing some of the barriers that the Tribes have faced in purchasing land and restoring the Tribes' rights to regulate hunting, fishing, natural resources, and land use on Tribal lands and waters, as allowed by federal law.

The stewardship of farmland as a critical natural resource is also central to the future of farming in our state. The Wabanaki peoples were the first stewards of the land that is now Maine and continue to steward land here today. A 2022 report by the Permanent Commission on the Status of Racial, Indigenous, and Tribal Populations describes how for many Indigenous communities in Maine, the benefits of local food production lie in Wabanaki peoples' ability to maintain ancient land-based knowledge and practices, restore ancestral relationships with the land, and support community members who struggle with food insecurity and food-related illnesses.³ LD 2007 would help to honor and uplift the abilities of the Wabanaki Nations to access and steward land and natural resources to provide for the needs and goals of their communities.

For all of these reasons, we urge you to support LD 2007 and restore the sovereign rights of the Wabanaki Tribes to self-govern.

² Kalt, J. P., Medford, A. B., and Taylor, J. B., Ash Center for Democratic Governance and Innovation, Harvard Kennedy School, Harvard University, *Economic and Social Impacts of Restrictions on the Applicability of Federal Indian Policies to the Wabanaki Nations in Maine*, p. 40 (Dec 2022), available at: <https://ash.harvard.edu/publications/economic-and-social-impacts-restrictions-applicability-federal-indian-policies>.

³ Permanent Commission on the Status of Racial, Indigenous and Tribal Populations, *Land Access for Indigenous and African American Farmers in Maine*, p. 10 (Feb 2022), available at: www.pcritp.me/resources.