



Testimony of Shelley Megquier, Policy and Research Director, Maine Farmland Trust, before the 131st Legislature's Joint Standing Committee on Appropriations and Financial Affairs and on Agriculture, Conservation, and Forestry

March 4, 2024

Good afternoon Senator Rotunda, Representative Sachs, members of the Joint Standing Committee on Appropriations and Financial Affairs and members of the Joint Standing Committee on Agriculture, Conservation, and Forestry. My name is Shelley Megquier and I am the Policy & Research Director at Maine Farmland Trust (MFT). MFT is providing testimony neither for nor against on LD 2214, An Act to Make Supplemental Appropriations and Allocations for the Expenditures of State Government, General Fund and Other Funds and to Change Certain Provisions of the Law Necessary to the Proper Operations of State Government for the Fiscal Years Ending June 30, 2024 and June 30, 2025.

MFT is a member-powered statewide organization that works to protect farmland, support farmers, and advance the future of farming. Our goals are 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.

I want to start by expressing gratitude to this Committee for its demonstrated commitment to supporting farmers and protecting our farmland such as through funding the Drought Relief Program, support for our dairy farmers, staffing for the Department of Agriculture, Conservation, and Forestry to tackle important and much needed regulation of solar development on agricultural land, support for the Maine Agriculture, Food and Forest Products Investment Fund, and more.

Though the Governor's Recommended 2024 General Fund Supplemental Budget includes a number of laudable inclusions, we'd like to provide feedback on some gaps and offer suggestions for revisions:

- 1. Investment in Maine's Dairy Stabilization Program (the Tier Program) rather than One-Time Funding.** The Tier Program provides critical economic support to dairy farmers, allowing more dairy farms to stay in business when the price they receive from the marketplace for their milk falls below their cost of production. In 2020, MFT published its Dairy Sector Report, a report that both analyzes the challenges and opportunities facing the dairy sector in Maine and identifies policy and market interventions that could help to stabilize the Maine dairy sector and enhance its future viability. One of the critical policy recommendations included within the report is for continued support and investment in the Tier Program. The Agriculture, Conservation, and Forestry Committee

recently hosted a public hearing and deliberated on LD 2188, a bill related to revised payment structure for the Tier Program based on the updated cost of production study completed in 2023, and voted unanimously in support of an amended version that would provide a 25% increase in payment to each Tier within the Dairy Stabilization Program.

We want for the Appropriations and Financial Affairs Committee members to know that much of the agricultural community is united behind our state's dairy farmers in asking for this 25 percent payment increase. Investment in the Tier program is more important than a one-time payment to milk producers as is currently outlined in Sec. HHH-1.

- 2. Robust Funding to Fully Implement Established Programs.** Recently created programs need to be fully stood up through robust funding in order to deliver expected results. The Maine Farmer Drought Relief Program, Maine Healthy Soils Program, and Maine Working Farmland Access and Protection Program are all examples of recently created programs with broad legislative, departmental, and public support that have not received funding adequate enough to be fully implemented. In addition, the Maine Agriculture, Food and Forest Products Investment Fund must be capitalized to support Maine's heritage industries, including agricultural producers and processors, through agricultural infrastructure development and increasing access to new markets and opportunities through public-private partnerships.

We want for the Appropriations and Financial Affairs Committee members to know that funding existing programs with broad support should be a high priority and that diverse agricultural producers across the state stand to benefit from the aforementioned programs if they can be robustly funded and fully implemented.

- 3. Strengthened Staff Capacity for Critical State Programs.** In order for critical state programs to be robustly implemented they must be fully staffed. We'd like to draw attention to a gap in long-term staff capacity within Bureau of Agriculture, Food, and Rural Resources and our desire to see this needed staff capacity added to the Supplemental Budget. This request for support dovetails with LD 579, *An Act to Support Farmland Conservation*, which was presented on January 17, 2024 to the Maine Legislature's Joint Standing Committee on Agriculture, Conservation, and Forestry and received unanimous support during the subsequent Work Session as Ought-to-Pass as Amended. The amendment establishes a sub-account administered by the Department of Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry to support public-private partnerships to carry out the purposes of the Maine Working Farmland Access and Protection Program. The amendment also establishes and provides ongoing funding (~\$122,772) for one full-time, permanent Resource Management Coordinator position within the department's Bureau of Agriculture, Food and Rural Resources.

As is noted in the memo attached to MFT's testimony, there are a number of conservation and agricultural organizations supportive of including this staff position within the Supplemental Budget. Agricultural conservation is critical to ensuring that we have the land base needed to sustain our heritage industries, grow our agricultural economy, strengthen food security, and build resilience to climate change for our state and communities.

Last but not least, a limited-term position was funded last session to support implementation of LD 1881 and to help ensure that Maine's clean energy goals aren't achieved at the cost of loss of our most high-value farmland. This position should be made a permanent in order to accomplish the objectives outlined in that legislation as well as to address ongoing needs related to balanced solar siting and renewable energy infrastructure's impact on our working farmland.

We want for Appropriations and Financial Affairs Committee members to know that funding for ongoing staff capacity within the Department of Agriculture, Conservation, and Forestry is strongly supported by the agricultural and conservation communities and that a robustly funded and implemented Working Farmland Access and Protection Program is an essential component of reaching the Maine Won't Wait goals of 30% of land conserved by 2030.

Thank you very much for your attention and I'd be happy to answer any questions.

TO: The Office of Governor Janet T. Mills

FROM: Shelley Megquier, Maine Farmland Trust
Heather Spalding, Maine Organic Farmers and Gardeners Association
Eric Venturini, Wild Blueberry Commission of Maine
Kaitlyn Nuzzo, The Nature Conservancy, Maine
Francesca Gundrum, Maine Audubon

DATE: February 5, 2024

RE: LD 579 – *An Act to Support Farmland Conservation and Transition Planning for Farmers*

The purpose of this memo is to share our collective support for strengthening the Bureau of Agriculture, Food and Rural Resources’ [Working Farmland Access and Protection Program](#) within the Maine Department of Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry and **to ask for the Mills Administration to include funding within the Supplemental Budget for added staff capacity in this critical state program.**

The request for support from the Governor’s Office dovetails with LD 579, *An Act to Support Farmland Conservation and Transition Planning for Farmers*, which was presented on January 17, 2024 to the Maine Legislature’s Joint Standing Committee on Agriculture, Conservation, and Forestry and received **unanimous support during the subsequent Work Session** as Ought-to-Pass as Amended. The amendment establishes a sub-account administered by the Department of Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry to support public-private partnerships to carry out the purposes of the Maine Working Farmland Access and Protection Program. The amendment also establishes and provides ongoing funding (~\$122,772) for one full-time, permanent Resource Management Coordinator position within the department’s Bureau of Agriculture, Food and Rural Resources.

We, the undersigned organizations, appreciate the Mills Administration’s demonstrated stalwart commitment to supporting Maine agriculture and conservation. Farmland is the foundation for thriving farm businesses, communities, and rural economies. But, farmland in Maine is at risk of being lost to agriculture due to increasing development pressures, a growing interest in farmland from non-farming buyers, dramatic increases in the cost of land, and farm viability challenges that are making it harder for farmers to afford to keep their land in agriculture. Farmers are increasingly squeezed between flat or declining food prices and continued dramatic increases in the costs of production. The unfortunate reality is that many of Maine’s farming businesses are in the red. Access to capital, including the capital gained during an easement purchase, is vital to finding a new path to viability for Maine’s farms. Protecting farmland through a conservation easement keeps land available for agricultural use and creates more affordable access to farmland for both new and established farmers.

In the words of some of our valued farmers across the state:

To pass our legacy on like my great grandfather did...that's a huge goal of mine. If the easement wasn't put in place...I'm fairly certain it wouldn't be a farm right now.

-Brendon Wormell, Wormell Farm, Cumberland

The Reed Farm consists of about 240 protected acres, where we milk 50 Jersey cows (these are the little brown ones) to produce 600,000 pounds of milk annually. We crop an additional 250 leased acres in three towns. We are deeply embedded in the local economy... Our purchasing a farm of this scale would not have been possible without the help of a farmland protection program.

-Katie and Nate Clark, Reed Farm, Windsor

The way our...economy looks at land is that it only has value if you can put a subdivision on it. Because of our proximity to a city center and the views, this property was at a higher risk for being developed. An agricultural easement made the value of it go down just enough so that we could afford to put it in an offer and ultimately purchase this piece of property and preserve it as a forever farm.

-Andrew Toothacker, Hart Farm, Holden

Agricultural conservation is critical to ensure that we have the land base needed to sustain our heritage industries, grow our agricultural economy, strengthen food security, and build resilience to climate change for our state and communities.

This effort is strongly aligned with established State goals:

- **Farmland protection is climate action.** The state'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. Protecting farmland is critical to achieving both of these goals.
- **Farmland protection supports economic development.** Farming is the lifeblood of our rural economies and plays a key role in supporting Maine's broader food sector, which is identified in the state's 10-year economic development plan as one of the four areas most ripe for economic development. Productive farmland—and affordable access to this land—is the foundation for thriving local farm and food businesses.
- **Farmland protection is key to food security.** Maine's Roadmap to End Hunger by 2030 proposes farmland protection as an important strategy to investing in and strengthening Maine's food infrastructure. Agricultural and food production activities of all scales, in all parts of the state, by all communities who wish to engage in them are important for ensuring food security.

One of the ways that we can advance farmland protection efforts in Maine is to strengthen the Working Farmland Access and Protection Program within the Department of Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry's Bureau of Agriculture, Food, and Rural Resources. This is what LD 579 seeks to do.

LD 579 does not change the scope of the Working Farmland Access and Protection Program but does, however, include one full-time staff person to help support a broader purpose and impact of the program. Increased capacity for this program was also identified as a priority within the LMF Government Evaluation Act report. According to DACF Bureau Director Craig Lapine in

his testimony in support of LD 579 during the public hearing, *“the proposed position is key to expanding DACF’s capacity to prevent the loss of farmland in the state. Currently, the Bureau’s Farm Viability and Farmland Protection Specialist can dedicate only about 15% of her time to protection projects because of all the grantmaking, technical assistance, and other critical farm viability tasks that fall to that position...”*

The group of undersigned organizations recognize that Maine needs to rapidly expand our farmland protection efforts in the state, particularly publicly funded farmland protection in order to stave off increasing development pressures and ensure that farmers can continue to access the land they need for agricultural production. And, we recognize that agricultural easements take time and expertise to put into place. It takes significant time and energy to close a project and farmers deserve responsive staff, quick turnarounds, and tailored easement terms whenever possible – all things that can be better accomplished with an additional skilled staff person within the Program.

Please don’t hesitate to reach out if you have any questions or comments in response to this letter.

Sincerely,

Shelley Megquier, Policy & Research Director, Maine Farmland Trust
Heather Spalding, Deputy Director & Senior Policy Director, Maine Organic Farmers and Gardeners Association
Eric Venturini, Executive Director, Wild Blueberry Commission of Maine
Kaitlyn Nuzzo, Director of Government Relations, Maine
Francesca Gundrum, Policy Advocate, Maine Audubon