



MAINE FARMLAND TRUST

**Testimony of Shelley Megquier, Policy and Research Director, Maine Farmland Trust, before
the 131st Legislature's Joint Standing Committee on Labor and Housing
March 26, 2024**

Greetings Senator Tipping, Representative Roeder, and members of the Joint Standing Committee on Labor and Housing. My name is Shelley Megquier, and I am providing testimony on behalf of Maine Farmland Trust (MFT) in support of LD 2273 – *An Act To Establish a State Minimum Hourly Wage for Agricultural Workers*.

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. Our main program areas are Farmland Protection, Farmland Access, Stewardship, Farm Business Planning, PFAS Support, Climate Resilience, and Policy and Research.

Over the years, MFT has collaborated with farmers, food businesses, and economic development organizations to establish enterprises and deliver a range of programs and services focused on establishing a vibrant and resilient agricultural sector and food system in Maine. We work directly with farmers of all experience levels as they develop markets and grow successful businesses.

MFT believes that to revitalize Maine's rural communities, farms must be economically viable and farm workers must be treated fairly. MFT also sees farm workers as a critical part of Maine farms and important contributors to our agricultural economy. Many of the farmers that we work with enjoy close working relationships with their staff, often working together season after season, and a number of employees either end up playing an important role in that farm's succession plan or go on to start their own farm businesses as part of the next generation of farmers.

MFT supports LD 2273 – *An Act to Establish a State Minimum Hourly Wage for Agricultural Workers* as an added layer of protection to ensure that agricultural workers are compensated fairly. We often hear from farm business owners how much they value and appreciate their staff. We also hear from farmers how, in order to find and retain workers, they need to offer at least the state minimum wage. Therefore, adding a legal protection requiring that agricultural workers receive the state minimum wage should not create undue economic hardship for our valued farm businesses across the state. Although challenges affecting farm business profitability and stability often prevent farm business owners from being able to paying their staff as much as they wish they could, we haven't received feedback from any farms in our network that being required to pay state minimum wage would present an unwarranted economic hardship.

LD 2273 adds the right to a minimum wage for farm workers to guarantee compensation protection and fairness in such a way that results in limited to no known negative repercussions to farm business owners – making this legislation a win-win solution for agricultural workers and business owners alike. For these reasons, we urge the committee to support LD 2273 to guarantee farm workers the right to at least the state's minimum wage. Thank you for your attention and I'd be happy to answer any questions.