



**Testimony of Shelley Megquier, Policy & Research Director, Maine Farmland Trust, to the 132nd Legislature's Joint Standing Committee on Appropriations and Financial Affairs and Joint Standing Committee on Agriculture, Conservation, and Forestry
February 27, 2025**

Senator Rotundo, Representative Gattine, and members of both the Joint Standing Committee on Appropriations and Financial Affairs and 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). I am providing testimony on behalf of MFT in support of the Maine Department of Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry's (DACF) Bureau of Agriculture requests within LD 210— *An Act Making Unified Appropriations and Allocations from the General Fund and Other Funds for the Expenditures of State Government and Changing Certain Provisions of the Law Necessary to the Proper Operations of State Government for the Fiscal Years Ending June 30, 2025, June 30, 2026 and June 30, 2027.*

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 farmland in every county in Maine, amounting to nearly 57,000 acres across 345 farms. Our Farm Network includes more than 550 farms that have participated in MFT's programming either through an agricultural easement or through one of our programs. Our main program areas are Farmland Protection, Farmland Access, Stewardship, Farm Business Planning, PFAS Support, Climate Resilience, and Policy and Research.

MFT understands that climate change is one of the most daunting challenges of our time, and will have significant impacts on Maine's agriculture sector. Maine farmers are already experiencing climate change impacts, and are needing to adapt to the increasing frequency of extreme weather events, including excessive precipitation and drought. Protecting soils and building soil health are important climate mitigation and adaptation strategies.

- With these challenges facing farmers in mind, we are very excited to support the allocations within LD 210 for the Maine Healthy Soils Program, a program MFT helped to champion when it was established in 2021, and the Farmers Drought Relief Grant Program, which will provide vital funding for farmers needing to shift practices in the face of increasing drought conditions. Please support the inclusion of this funding to support farmers in the final biennial budget.

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. 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. The Maine Working Farmland Access and Protection Program was established in 2021 to provide protection to strategically

significant working farmland properties whose continued availability to commercial agricultural businesses is essential to the long-term future of this sector of Maine's economy.

- MFT strongly supports Part S of the Final GF Language 2026-27 Biennial (Sec. S-1. 7 MRSA §164, sub-§5) that establishes a separate account administered by the Department of Agriculture, Conservation, and Forestry to support public-private partnerships to carry out the purposes of the Working Farmland Access and Protection Program. A separate account would offer the Department an additional tool to support farmland conservation, essentially adding flexibility for more streamlined implementation of the Program.

Department of Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry was recently granted permitting authority for solar development projects of more than 5 acres located wholly or partially on high value farmland. Managing ongoing permitting will require staff capacity to avoid delays and ensure consistent application of permitting procedures and balanced solar siting guidelines.

- MFT is glad to see the inclusion of funding in the biennial budget proposal to continue and make permanent funding for the Environmental Licensing Supervisor position previously established by Public Law 2023, chapter 448 and provides funding for related All Other costs (Pg A-59). This staff position is essential for realizing the Department's responsibility to oversee solar energy permitting on high value agricultural land.

Conservation is critical to ensure that we have the land base needed to grow our agricultural economy, strengthen food security, and build resilience to climate change for our state and communities. The Land for Maine's Future (LMF) Program is an important source of public funding for protecting Maine's forests, farmlands, and working waterfronts. Since its creation in 1987, LMF has protected over 600,000 acres, including 42 farms. The Land for Maine's Future Trust Fund was established to enable it to accept private donations while earning interest on its funds.

- MFT supports the one-time allocation from Other Special Revenue Funds of \$8,105,445 for land acquisitions in the Land for Maine's Future Trust Fund (Z377). This allocation will allow for ongoing land conservation work as we make progress towards shared conservation goals.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony in support of LD 210. I'm happy to answer any questions you may have.