

Senator George J. Mitchell
Center for Sustainability Solutions



5710 Norman Smith Hall
Orono, Maine 04469-5710
Tel: 207.581.3195
Fax: 207.581.3320
umgmc@maine.edu
umaine.edu/mitchellcenter/

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Subject: Written testimony to the Joint Standing Committee on Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry in support of LD 415, An Act to Support Hunger Prevention in Maine.

Dear Senator Talbot Ross, Representative Pluecker, and members of the Joint Standing Committee on Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry,

My name is Susanne Lee, and I am a Faculty Fellow at the Senator George J. Mitchell Center for Sustainability Solutions at the University of Maine. Since 2019, we have worked as part a multi-disciplinary faculty and student team focused on ending wasted food and food loss in our state. Our team works with key Maine food waste stakeholders – farms, businesses, schools, organizations, municipalities, and consumers throughout the state – to identify, develop, and test sustainable food loss & waste solutions that will equitably benefit all Maine people.

My colleagues include Prof. Travis Blackmer (Economics), Dr. Ivan Fernandez (Soil & Climate Science) and Dr. Jason Bolton (Food & Nutrition Sciences). Our expertise is also based on research and collaborations with leading national food waste organizations like ReFED, Zero Food Waste Coalition, Harvard Food Law & Policy, and the EPA's Food Too Good To Waste Network, as well as our own Maine food waste advisory group of over forty leading Maine food system stakeholders. In addition, our team works closely with the Maine Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) using their [Food Waste Hierarchy](#) to guide the development of sustainable food loss and wasted food solutions for our state.

Today, I am submitting written testimony on behalf of R1 UMaine in support of LD 415, An Act to Support Hunger Prevention in Maine. This testimony has been informed by our University food loss and waste research and statewide outreach.

Based on our team's most recent work on the [Maine Food Loss & Waste Generation Study 2024](#), Maine has an estimated 361,506 tons (723 million pounds) of wasted food and food loss annually. The economic cost to our state is great and is estimated at over \$1.3 billion dollars annually, while the environmental impact is equivalent to the carbon footprint of **302,142 passenger vehicles annually – more than the number of passenger cars (295,849) registered in Maine in 2023.**

Of that total, the Farms and Agriculture sector in Maine generates the largest amount of food loss estimated at over 90,000 tons annually - commonly caused by unharvested, unanticipated surplus products. This farm and agriculture food loss is not only the economic loss for our agriculture economy but also the loss of the valuable labor, energy, land, and the almost ¼ of fresh water resources that are used to produce food that is never eaten. While the majority of this farm food loss is plowed under in the fields and not landfilled, the Study finds that “there is great potential to fight hunger by recovering this surplus and redistributing it to feed Mainers.”

In addition, we are finalizing a current research study to examine the link between Maine’s food loss and waste and our charitable food system entitled, **Unlocking the Economic, Social, and Environmental Benefits of Using Surplus Food in Maine: A Qualitative Survey of the Challenges and Opportunities for Redistributing Maine’s Food Surplus Into the Charitable Food System**. One of the study recommendations to increase charitable food system sourcing highlights, “Increase investment in CFS farm surplus purchasing programs (e.g. Mainers Feeding Mainers) to support farms, minimize food loss, and stock regional Maine food banks.”

Finally, our team partnered with the MDEP to lead our state’s recent Materials Management Task Force (2024), comprised of key stakeholders in Maine’s waste management systems (business, state, municipal, and community representatives). The task force was tasked with making recommendations to improve the economic, social and environmental outcomes of Maine’s waste management system. Our wasted food and food loss subgroup developed three key recommendations including, “Maximize food rescue, recovery and donation of edible food through state tax credits, clearer liability protections, support for donation infrastructure, and preventing organizational policies that mandate disposal of edible food. “

Based on our recent Maine statewide, community-engaged, stakeholder-led research, we believe that LD415 which requests an additional \$1M per year of state investment in the Mainers Feeding Mainers program which would support the harvesting, processing, and transport of good, edible, nutritious Maine farm food that might otherwise go uneaten is exactly the type of win-win-win initiative that should be funded.

My colleagues and I would be happy to provide any additional information or answer any questions. Thank you for your strong support of the University of Maine which makes our research possible.

Susanne Lee

Faculty Fellow

Sen. George J. Mitchell Center for Sustainability Solutions

University of Maine

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