



Testimony before the Joint Standing Committee on Agriculture, Conservation, and Forestry
By Eliza Paterson, American Farmland Trust, Senior New England Policy Associate
March 13, 2025

RE: Support for LD 593 – An Act to Extend Funding for the Land for Maine’s Future Program

Senator Talbot Ross, Representative Pluecker, and members of the Joint Standing Committee on Agriculture, Conservation, and Forestry, thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony **in support of LD 593.**

My name is Eliza Paterson, and I am American Farmland Trust’s (AFT’s) Senior New England Policy Associate. AFT is the nation’s leading conservation organization dedicated to protecting farmland, promoting sound farming practices, and keeping farmers on the land. Since its founding in 1980 by farmers and citizens concerned about the rapid loss of farmland to development, AFT has helped protect over 6.5 million acres of farmland and has led the way for the adoption of conservation practices on millions more. Established in 1985, AFT’s New England Program works to save the land that sustains us across the region. AFT has a long history of working in Maine, stemming back to our role in supporting the first farmland protection projects undertaken through the Land for Maine’s Future program.

Maine’s farmland plays a vital role in our regional economy and food security. Maine has the most agricultural land of any of the six New England states by far, as well as the largest amount of prime and important farmland. According to AFT’s [Farms Under Threat: The State of the States](#), roughly 18,000 acres of Maine’s agricultural land were converted to urban development or low-density residential land use between 2001 and 2016. This loss of farmland is enough to generate \$10 million in annual revenue. To date, Maine has protected less than five percent of the state’s farmland. Additionally, without adequate tools for additional farmland protection efforts in Maine, according to AFT’s [Farms Under Threat 2040](#), an estimated 53,400 acres of Maine’s farmland will be lost to development in the next 17 years.

The primary funding source for the Maine Department of Agriculture, Conservation, and Forestry’s Working Farmland Access and Protection Program is the Land for Maine’s Future (LMF) account. The last LMF bond for \$40 million was approved by Maine’s voters in 2021. For farmland protection, to date, the state has deployed over \$12.5 million in state funding and has attracted an additional \$22 million in matching funds from private land trusts and both federal and municipal sources. This number is in stark comparison to the Massachusetts Agricultural Preservation Restriction (APR) Program, which has allocated over \$245 million towards farmland protection efforts.

The intent of LD 593 is to provide \$10 million, annually, to the LMF Program over the next two years. Farmland protection is one of the initiatives that is funded through the LMF program. As of January 2023, according to AFT’s Purchase of Agricultural Conservation Easement (PACE) Survey, since its creation in 1987, LMF has protected over 600,000 acres, including nearly

10,000 acres of farmland and 42 farms. The funding LD 593 would provide will be critical for the state to continue farmland protection efforts until more permanent funding sources are secured.

Protecting farms in Maine provides the state with long term food security, meaning that no matter what disruptions impact the global food system, local food can still be provided to Mainers. While the state's food system is supported by mostly small, family-owned businesses, permanently protected farmland benefits all Maine residents, and all types of farmers – both multi-generational farms and new farms. More must be done to address the growing threats to Maine's farmland, including real estate development pressures, land loss due to a changing climate, and high land prices. It is important to note that protecting local farms does not compete with the demand for land dedicated to housing, as agricultural land is generally located away from areas where housing is needed most.

Farmland protection will be critical to the future of ME's local food system and economy

Maine's farmland directly supports the state's economy with over 7,600 farm businesses, close to 13,700 producers, and 15,600 farm laborers. In 2021, the state's agricultural sector produced \$21 billion in direct sales with an overall economic impact of \$3.6 billion.¹

Maine's farmland protection and access efforts are a key component of the state's strategies to combat climate change. Human activity on an acre of farmland produces 66 times fewer greenhouse gas emissions than that on an acre of developed land, and participation in farmland protection programs has been proven to encourage the adoption of soil conserving and carbon sequestering regenerative farming practices. Farmland also provides a range of reliable, cost-saving environmental and climate-resilient services, such as preservation of open space, air pollution removal, wildlife habitat, flood mitigation, and carbon sequestration.

LD 593 is in alignment with the goals outlined in the November 2024 [Maine Won't Wait Plan](#). The number one goal of Strategy E, Protect the Environment and Natural and Working Lands and Water in Maine, is to increase the total acreage of conserved natural and working lands in the state to 30 percent by 2030. One of the primary methods listed to achieve this goal states the establishment of permanent funding for conservation programs such as the LMF program.

Finally, farmers often use farmland protection funds to invest in business viability and innovation, most frequently using them to purchase leased land, expand and diversify their operations, upgrade farm equipment, and/or transfer farms to the next generation. Protecting farmland also encourages other local farmers and business owners to invest in their own operations because they have greater confidence in the stability and longevity of the local farm sector.

Let's promote farmland for the future through the LMF Program

According to a recent report released by New England Feeding New England titled "[A Regional Approach to Food System Resilience](#)," it is estimated that nearly 1 million acres of land will need to be brought back into agricultural production if New England wants to produce thirty

¹ Land for Maine's future project data, found at <https://www.maine.gov/dacf/lmf/docs/lmf-brochure-regional-2023.pdf>

percent of the food consumed in our region by 2030. The same report also suggests that most of the farmland in the region is located in Maine and Vermont. By passing LD 593, Maine has the opportunity to support a more robust state and regional food system.

As a national and regional leader in farmland protection, American Farmland Trust fully supports this legislation and urges the committee to pass it this session. If you have any questions, please feel free to reach out to me at epaterson@farmland.org, or Jim Habana Hafner, AFT New England's Regional Director, at jhafner@farmland.org.

On behalf of AFT, thank you for your time and for the opportunity to submit testimony in support of LD 593.

With sincere regards,

Eliza Paterson
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American Farmland Trust

American Farmland Trust is an agricultural non-profit organization with a mission to save the land that sustains us by protecting farmland, promoting sound farming practices, and keeping farmers on the land. AFT is the only national agricultural organization that approaches its work in this comprehensive, holistic manner. We recognize the connection between the land, forward-looking farming practices, and the farmers who do the work.