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**Testimony of Ellen Stern Griswold, Managing Director of Programs, Wolfe's Neck Center, to the 132nd
Legislature's Committee on Appropriations and Financial Affairs
April 10, 2025**

Good morning Senator Rotundo, Representative Gattine, and members of the Committee on Appropriations and Financial Affairs. My name is Ellen Stern Griswold, and I am the Managing Director of Programs at Wolfe's Neck Center for Agriculture & the Environment (WNC). I am submitting this testimony on behalf WNC in support of LD 1140 – *An Act to Authorize a General Fund Bond Issue to Strengthen the Resilience and Growth of Maine's Agricultural Economy*.

WNC is a fast-growing, national nonprofit organization based on a campus of over 600 acres of coastal farmland in Freeport, Maine. Our work is dedicated to creating a world where agriculture and food systems support farmer viability, thriving ecosystems, and vibrant communities. Through regenerative farmer training, demonstration, innovative research, and collaborations, WNC works to advance agriculture – on our own campus and nationally – to accelerate holistic change in food systems and mitigate the effects of a changing climate.

In 2016, with the support of the U.S. Department of Agriculture and Stonyfield Organic, WNC launched its Organic Dairy Research and Training Program, which was the first of its kind in the nation. This innovative program serves as a testing ground for new management technologies and techniques, while also training the next generation of farmers in rotational grazing and regenerative and organic agricultural systems. WNC's program is part of the Dairy Grazing Apprenticeship, an accredited National Apprenticeship registered with the Employment and Training Administration at the U.S. Department of Labor. The program consists of 4,000 hours of training over a period of two years, with 3,712 hours focused on employment and mentoring under an approved Mentor Dairy Grazier. At its core, the program is a guided pathway to dairy grazing farming careers, which strengthens the economic and environmental wellbeing of rural communities and the dairy industry.

The success of and value provided by WNC's Organic Dairy Research and Training Program is directly tied to the economic viability of the dairy sector in Maine and beyond. Dairy farms are central to Maine's agriculture sector and rural communities, providing economic opportunities for rural businesses such as farm equipment dealers, grain and farm supply stores, and veterinarians that support the growth of other local farms. But dairy farms today are struggling with a number of challenges that impact their economic stability, including a significant rise in the cost of production, labor shortages, marketing challenges, a lack of processing infrastructure, and, for the last ten to fifteen years, significant volatility in the average price received by farmers for fluid milk.¹ These challenges are particularly acute for beginning dairy farmers, like the farmers

¹ National Agricultural Statistics Service (NASS), *Annual Survey Data, Maine, Milk Price Received – Measured in \$/CWT*, <https://quickstats.nass.usda.gov/results/89A542CB-DDFD-3C7A-8C17-D01A50770A5A> (last visited Apr. 10, 2025).

who start their operations after WNC's Organic Dairy Research and Training Program. LD 1140 could help to address these challenges by providing \$5 million in funding to support the dairy sector in Maine.

Similarly, the issuance of the bond would capitalize the Maine Agriculture, Food and Forest Products Investment Fund and allow for strategic investments in Maine's agricultural infrastructure. This type of investment is needed to increase the supply of Maine-grown products, create new market opportunities for Maine farms, and thereby strengthen the viability of the food sector in Maine. Last year, I represented WNC on the Natural and Working Lands Working Group (NWLWG). One of the strategies identified by the NWLWG and included in the update to Maine's climate action plan, *Maine Won't Wait*, is targeted investments in farms and food system infrastructure in order to reach the plan's goal of increasing the amount of food consumed in Maine from state food producers to 30% by 2030.² LD 1140 would help to provide that needed investment in Maine's food sector, and in doing so, also allow the state to leverage private funding to support that effort – thereby multiplying the impact of this smart investment. For all of these reasons, WNC hopes that you will support LD 1140 to ensure the growth of Maine's food sector and all of the economic and climate benefits it provides.

² Maine Climate Council, *Maine Won't Wait, A Four-Year Plan for Climate Action* (Nov. 2024) at 117, available at https://www.maine.gov/climateplan/sites/maine.gov.climateplan/files/2024-11/MWW_2024_Book_112124.pdf.