



**Comments of the Maine Organic Farmers and Gardeners Association
In Support of LD 362 - *An Act to Authorize a General Fund Bond Issue
to Replenish the Land for Maine's Future Program***

April 10, 2025

Good afternoon Senator Rotundo, Representative Gattine, and members of the Appropriations and Financial Affairs Committee. My name is Heather Spalding and I'm deputy director of the Maine Organic Farmers and Gardeners Association (MOFGA). MOFGA supports LD 362 - *An Act to Authorize a General Fund Bond Issue to Replenish the Land for Maine's Future Program*. The funds provided by this bond issue, in the amount of \$50,000,000, will be used by the Land for Maine's Future Board for the acquisition of land and interest in land for conservation; water access; wildlife or fish habitat including deer wintering areas; outdoor recreation, including hunting and fishing; working farmland preservation; and working waterfront preservation. We thank Senator Black for his stalwart support for the LMF program and particularly his efforts to protect Maine farmland.

A broad-based community, MOFGA is transforming our food system by supporting farmers, empowering people to feed their communities, and advocating for an organic future. MOFGA certifies 537 organic farms and processing operations representing more than \$120 million in sales. We're working hard to create opportunities for Maine's next generation of farmers. Each of these farmers is a Maine businessperson for whom economic health and environmental health are interdependent. While MOFGA envisions a future of healthy ecosystems, communities, people, and economies sustained by the practices of organic agriculture, we attribute our success to collaboration and outreach to growers across the management spectrum.

LMF is founded on the belief that our future social and economic well-being depends upon maintaining the quality and availability of natural areas for recreation, hunting and fishing, conservation, wildlife habitat, vital ecologic functions and scenic beauty, and that the State has a responsibility and a duty to pursue an aggressive and coordinated policy to assure that this Maine heritage is passed on to future generations. Protecting farmland is an important aspect of LMF. In fact, LMF stipulates that 10% of funds raised must go toward protecting farmland. The LMF visionaries noted that farmland preservation projects would provide critical support for farmer and community efforts to keep land in production rather than being developed into house lots, commercial real estate or industrial sites. Placing conservation easements on farmland will help ensure that land available for agricultural use by both new and established farmers.

There are 42 farms in the LMF program, representing nearly 10,000 acres of conserved farmland. The most recent agricultural easement placed on a farm happened in 2024 on 76 acres of MOFGA-certified organic New Leaf Farm in Durham, which is owned by longtime, now retired, MOFGA Board and Staff member Dave Colson. Several other LMF farms are MOFGA-certified organic operations.

We are pleased with the commitment to LMF that Governor Mills, the Legislature and the people of Maine have shown for land conservation. But when it comes to Maine farmland, there is a real urgency to go beyond LMF's current 9,819 farmland acres. Farmland is under serious threat of development and pollution, and we must do everything we can to protect it. The 2022 Census of Agriculture showed that between 2017 and 2022, Maine lost more than 82,000 acres of farmland to development pressures and escalating land prices. Maine has the lowest amount of protected farmland in any state in New England.

Increasing Maine's farm conservation easements will help move Maine toward the climate action plan goal of conserving 30% of Maine land by 2030. Governor Mills also intends to develop our local food systems and increase the amount of food produced and consumed in Maine to 30% by 2030.

At MOFGA we also have ambitious goals for a healthy Maine agriculture. We provide extensive training to set new farmers up for success. We offer an introductory farm apprenticeship program, beginning farmer training through our two-year Journeyperson program, and a Farm Resilience Program for farmers in years 5-10 of their business. An LMF conserved farm is a perfect setting for new farmers from MOFGA's training programs, especially in farm viability. One of the nice benefits of LMF funding for farmers is that the program allows 5% of the funds to be granted for business plan development and implementation.

Many of our new farmers are feeling the pressures of diminishing farmland access. Consistently one of the top challenges that our new farmers face is access to farmland due to escalating land prices and development. We're working hard to train the farmers for the future. We need to ensure that there is land for them to farm.

MOFGA also recognizes that the health of our agricultural economy is linked to the health of our working waterfronts, our wild lands, state parks and even historic sites. In addition to nearly 10,000 acres of farmland, over nearly four decades LMF has helped conserve 330,000 acres of working forests; 1,272 miles of shoreland; 158 miles of recreational trails; 73 recreational water access sites; and 30 commercial working waterfront properties. All 16 counties have benefited. The program is critical to protecting Maine's character and traditions.

Thank you for your consideration of this important legislation. We encourage the Committee to support this initiative.