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**Comments of the Maine Organic Farmers and Gardeners Association  
In Support of LD 577 - *An Act to Maximize Federal Funding and  
Protect Maine's Universal School Meals Program***

April 10, 2025

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Good afternoon Senator Rafferty, Representative Murphy, and members of the Education and Cultural Affairs Committee. My name is Heather Spalding and I'm deputy director of the Maine Organic Farmers and Gardeners Association (MOFGA). MOFGA supports Senator Tipping's amended version of LD 577 - *An Act to Maximize Federal Funding and Protect Maine's Universal School Meals Program*. Just as ongoing cuts to federal food and agriculture programs are having devastating impacts on farmers, cuts to supplemental nutrition assistance and school meal programs are threatening the health of our students. LD 577 will help Maine uphold its non-partisan School Meals for All commitment to nourishing our students so they can learn at full potential and help us build a vibrant and healthy future for Maine.

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.

Maine's School Meals for All program is something for all of us to be proud of and we need to defend and continuously improve it. Since the start of the program, Maine has seen a 25% increase in school meal participation. It also has provided opportunities for Maine farms to deliver fresh, healthy foods directly to their local schools. Still, it is shocking that Maine has the highest rate of child food insecurity in New England with 20% of Maine's kids experiencing food insecurity and 40% of them being ineligible for school meals. Providing meals in schools demonstrates that we can reduce childhood hunger, decrease childhood weight issues, improve nutrition and wellness, enhance child development and school readiness, and support learning, attendance and healthy behavior. Providing the same benefit to all children decreases the stigma associated with receiving a "free lunch" as well.

During the 2023/2024 school year, local producers earned more than \$968,000 by providing local foods to Maine schools. The foods being served were fresh, nutritious, creative and fun for kids to learn about, cook with and sample. The program is helping schools connect to local farmers and fisher folk and allows food service personnel to be more responsive to the specific dietary needs of students.

Having LD 577 in place would ensure that Maine is able to maximize federal funding for school meals regardless of federal changes, even if the federal funding available for Maine is significantly reduced.

Attached to this testimony is an opinion editorial that recently appeared in the Bangor Daily News explaining the significant benefits that come connecting local farms to school meal programs, and the dire threats that we are facing from the current presidential administration. We urge the Committee to support LD 577 to ensure a healthy and vibrant student population in Maine.

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# From school lunches to farm fields, federal actions are harming Mainers

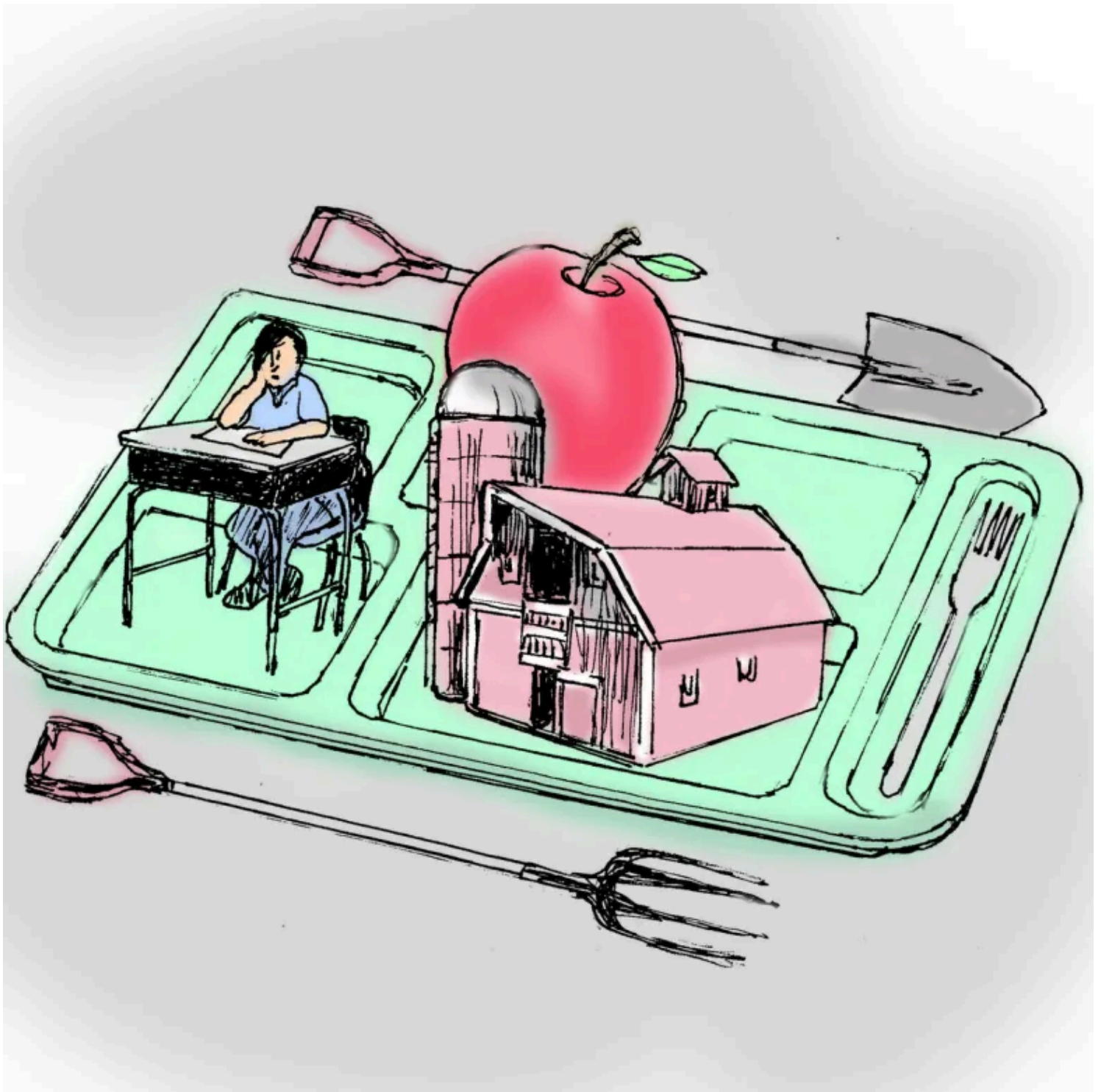
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by **Opinion Contributor**  
April 4, 2025

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*Sarah Alexander is the executive director at the Maine Organic Farmers and Gardeners Association. Justin Strasburger is the executive director at Full Plates Full Potential.*

There is no doubt that just two months into the new administration, decisions made from a distance in Washington, D.C., are affecting our way of life in Maine. From the uncertainty created by **funding and staffing cuts**, to market instability **due to tariffs**, our farmers and school children are feeling the impacts of these federal actions. While Sens. Susan Collins and Angus King, and Rep. Chellie Pingree sent official letters to the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Maine's congressional delegation must do more to restore funding on behalf of Maine farmers and school children.

Although **only 1 percent** of the USDA budget supports programs that directly help farmers improve farm management practices, increase yields and improve availability of local foods, the benefits to farmers and their communities are outsized. Additionally, the Department of Education's Local Food for Schools program provides funding for K-12 schools to purchase healthy, locally produced foods, improving children's access to healthy food choices, while supporting local farmers.

Our organizations work directly with farmers and schools, and have seen firsthand how these distant federal actions are directly affecting everyday Mainers.

The Local Food for Schools program in Maine has been **cut by \$2.8 million** in 2025, with nearly \$2.5 million going directly to K-12 schools. This funding has been instrumental in getting Maine-produced foods into secondary schools in underserved areas such as hard-to-reach towns in rural Maine, thereby supporting both healthy food access and farmers. Caitlin Frame and Andy Smith of The Milkhouse Farm & Creamery in Monmouth currently supply eight school districts with their farm's yogurt, providing nutritious options for hundreds of Maine children every day. They were planning to reach more school districts this year, but given funding and program cuts, they likely will not have the opportunity.

Todd Chretien from Fair Share Farm in Wayne grows MOFGA-certified organic vegetables and was planning to expand his markets this year from farmers markets and community supported agriculture customers, to public schools. However, the recent federal actions may prevent Chretien from seeing his fresh fruits and vegetables on cafeteria trays. Waiting on grant funding to come through is a gamble given both the timing of the growing season and the fact that farmers are expected to pay for projects upfront and wait for reimbursement. If the funding doesn't come through for Chretien, he would be left paying \$20,000 in extra expenses this year, which is not an option for his small-scale farm. He'll likely be forced to put a hold on expanding production this year until there's a clear answer for how to move forward.

Referred to as “**The People’s Department**” by Abraham Lincoln after its establishment in 1862, the USDA has had a long history of supporting farmers through a variety of timely and relevant programs, knowledgeable technical assistance providers, and innovative research. Until recently, the operations of the USDA had reflected the reality that all Americans are directly affected by, and benefit from, farming.

Janelle Plummer of New Spoke Farm in West Paris said it best at a farmer **press conference** in late February: “Taking these funding opportunities away from farmers, breaking existing contracts with farmers — it affects all of us. In the same way that food starts in a farmer’s field and ends on your plate, the repercussions of these political decisions will ripple out into all of our communities. The effect of this doesn’t end on my farm, it only begins there.”

While in recent days **some funds have been unfrozen** and some staff have been **temporarily reinstated**, that doesn’t reflect what we’re hearing and seeing on the ground, and the long-term impacts of these actions on our farmers and communities are yet unknown. We encourage Maine’s congressional delegation to advocate for farmers and schoolchildren by quickly reinstating programs that have been cut.