



Testimony before the Joint Standing Committee on Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry
By Eliza Paterson, American Farmland Trust, Senior New England Policy Associate
April 17th, 2025

RE: Support for LD 1528 – An Act to Support Farmland Conservation

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

Thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony **in support of LD 1528.**

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. 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 supporting the first farmland protection projects undertaken through the Land for Maine's Future program.

Farmland plays a vital role in the state's economy, rural communities and food security – and is regionally important. LD 1528 would increase the ability of the state to protect this vital resource by creating an account managed by the Maine Department of Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry (DACF)'s Bureau of Agriculture, Food, and Rural Resources to facilitate an expansion of publicly funded farmland protection efforts, building staff capacity within this existing state program, and increasing public funding for farmland conservation through a \$1 million appropriation.

Maine's farmland is at risk. According to the [2022 Census of Agriculture](#), between 2017 and 2022, more than 82,000 acres of farmland in Maine fell out of agricultural production. At the same time, Maine has protected less than five percent of the state's farmland to date – the lowest percentage of any New England state.

Protecting farmland through agricultural conservation easements keeps land available for agricultural use and creates more affordable access to farmland for both new and established farmers. This supports a thriving agricultural economy in Maine, which is essential for rural economic development, the viability of farm businesses, maintaining agricultural land in production, and ensuring a resilient food system.

Maine needs to pursue different strategies simultaneously to accelerate farmland conservation efforts. These strategies include continued funding for the Land for Maine's Future Program, specific funding for farmland conservation, and promoting farm viability. And because 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, protecting Maine farmland is important to the region's food system and food security.

LD 1528 provides dedicated public funding to protect working farmland and will help ensure that the state has the program structures and capacity in place for efficient use of this funding through increased staff, and expansion of public funding, and \$1 million in appropriations.

Moreover, LD 1528 aligns with the 2024 Maine Won't Wait climate action plan, which establishes new targets specific to farmland protection. This calls for the state to secure ongoing funding dedicated to farmland protection and to double the amount of permanently protected farmland by 2030.

As a national and regional leader in farmland protection, we fully support this legislation and urge 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, Ph.D., 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 1528.

Sincerely,

Eliza Paterson
Senior New England Policy Associate
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.