



Testimony of Abby Farnham, Assistant Director, Policy & Research, Maine Farmland Trust, to the 132nd Legislature's Joint Standing Committee on Energy, Utilities and Technology

May 8th, 2025

Good afternoon Senator Lawrence, Representative Sachs, and members of the Joint Standing Committee on Energy, Utilities and Technology. My name is Abby Farnham and I am the Assistant Director of Policy & Research at Maine Farmland Trust (MFT). I am providing testimony on behalf of MFT in support of LD 1850 – *An Act to Improve Interagency Coordination on Renewable Energy Construction Projects*.

MFT is a member-powered statewide organization that works to protect farmland, support farmers, and advance the future of farming. Our goals are to keep agricultural lands working and help farmers and their communities thrive. Since our founding in 1999, MFT has helped to permanently protect farmland in every county in Maine, amounting to nearly 57,000 acres across 345 farms. Our Farm Network includes more than 550 farms that have participated in MFT's programming either through an agricultural easement or through one of our programs. Our main program areas are Farmland Protection, Farmland Access, Stewardship, Farm Business Planning, PFAS Support, Climate Resilience, and Policy and Research.

Protecting farmland is critical for ensuring we have the land base needed to grow our agricultural economy and strengthen food security for our communities, state, and region. But, farmland in Maine is at risk. The 2022 Census of Agriculture showed that between 2017 and 2022, more than 82,000 acres of farmland in Maine fell out of agricultural production and we lost over 560 farms.¹ Farmland in Maine is at risk from increasing development pressures, a growing interest in farmland from non-farming buyers, dramatic increases in the cost of land, and farm viability challenges that are making it harder for farmers to afford to keep their land in agricultural production.

Over the past several years, solar energy development has been increasing rapidly across the state, including on undeveloped agricultural lands. As renewable energy development has increased in the state so too has our understanding of the impacts that these projects can have on the amount of farmland taken out of agricultural production, the loss of important agricultural soils, and the competition for land that farmers need to lease in order to support their operations. A major shortcoming, however, has been the lack of comprehensive, easily accessible data on renewable energy installations and detailed characteristics of impacted land. This bill seeks to address that information gap.

MFT supports renewable energy production as an essential component of Maine's needed action to combat climate change. On-farm energy production also can provide economic support to a farm and reduce the farm's energy costs. However, it is important that solar development does not also result in the loss of critical agricultural resources, displace agricultural production, or impede the ability of farmers to access the land base needed for their operations now and in the future, including farmers who rely on leased land. It is critical to adequately balance the State's need for renewable energy

¹ USDA NASS, *Census of Agriculture for 2022, Maine*, "Land: 2022 and 2017."

generation with the State's commitment to protecting working and natural lands and growing a robust local food system.

MFT supports the proposed sponsor amendment to LD 1850 because it directs the Governor's Energy Office to coordinate with other relevant state agencies to create a database for tracking renewable energy construction projects across the state, including information such as geospatial data and a description of the prior land uses of the project site. This database would help provide information for identifying renewable energy land use trends and informing strategies for avoiding the overdevelopment of important resources.

The database proposed by this bill aligns with the recommendations of the Agricultural Solar Stakeholder Group (ASSG), which MFT was very happy to participate in, that was created by LD 820 in the 130th Legislature and was convened by the Maine Department of Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry and the Governor's Energy Office to develop consensus recommendations to incentivize the siting of solar energy projects that minimize impacts to valuable agricultural lands.²

We offer one suggestion, as noted in the ASSG recommendation, that where applicable, this information should be made publicly accessible in an appropriate format to be used by stakeholders to identify land use trends and cumulative impacts on natural resources and working lands.

Thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony in support of the proposed sponsor amendment to LD 1850.

² Final Report of the Agricultural Solar Stakeholder Group, p. 31 (Jan 2022), available at: <https://www.maine.gov/energy/studies-reports-working-groups/current-studies-working-groups/agricultural-solar-stakeholder-group>