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Senator Rotundo, Representative Gattine, and distinguished members of the Joint Standing Committee on Appropriations and Financial Affairs:

My name is Bill Pluecker. I represent House District 44, which includes the towns of Warren, Union, and Hope. I serve as Chair of the Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry Committee, and have been a vegetable farmer for two decades now. I am proud to be the sponsor of LD 2094 "An Act to Authorize a General Fund Bond Issue to Support Maine's Agricultural and Forestry Sectors."

Maine's agricultural sector faces unprecedented challenges that require investment. Between shifting federal funding, and climate changes like this past summer's drought leaving farmers struggling with losses, farmers are facing a shifting landscape unlike the past. While farms have struggled and gone out of business over the last eight years I have been in the state house. We haven't seen the investment needed in agriculture and forestry.

We are all eaters. We all depend on our food, farm, and forestry sectors to survive and thrive. The pandemic showed us something I believe we all agree on—Maine needs a vibrant food system to sustain ourselves. Coming together as parties and politicians to get this bipartisan bill across the finish line needs to be all of our priorities.

With federal agricultural funding becoming increasingly unpredictable. Maine cannot afford to wait for Washington while our farmers continue to go out of business. This \$40,000,000 bond represents the investment our heritage industries desperately need.

Through my work as Chair of the ACF Committee, I have seen our committee unanimously support each and every program outlined in the bond before you today. This bond funds proven programs our legislature has already established: the Maine Agriculture, Food and Forest Products Investment Fund, the Farmers Drought Relief Grant Program, the Maine Healthy Soils Program, and the Working Farmland Access and Protection Program. These aren't experimental initiatives—they're programs we've created, staffed, and launched with bipartisan support. What we need now is sustained investment to transform the work we've done together into real impact for the people we serve.

Last year, I introduced LD 1739, a bond to support agriculture in Maine. Senator Daughtry also submitted a related bill, LD 1140. The bill before you today is the administration's effort to combine many of these proposals with stakeholder feedback. This represents a strong foundation and starting point for discussion.

In light of shifting funding from the federal government, increasing climate pressure, and shifting commodity markets that don't support Maine's farms, the state needs this bond to provide the stable investment our farmers need to weather current challenges and build long-term resilience.

Thank you for your time. I'm happy to answer any questions. I ask for the committee's full support for this historic investment in our heritage industries, and I look forward to continuing our collaborative work throughout this hearing and in the weeks ahead.

Thank you.