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TESTIMONY BEFORE THE JOINT STANDING COMMITTEE ON AGRICULTURE,
CONSERVATION AND FORESTRY

IN SUPPORT OF LD 315

LD 315, *An Act to Provide Funding for Drought Relief and Other Programs Benefiting Maine Farmers*

February 13, 2023

Senator Ingwersen, Representative Pluecker, and members of the Joint Standing Committee on Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry, my name is Craig Lapine, and I am the Director of the Bureau of Agriculture, Food and Rural Resources. I am speaking on behalf of the Department of Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry (DACF) in support of LD 315, *An Act to Provide Funding for Drought Relief and Other Programs Benefiting Maine Farmers*.

This bill was originally a concept draft. Since the public hearing for LD 315 was scheduled, the sponsor shared draft language with interested parties. The amendment implements the recommendations of the Department of Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry's January 2023 report, *Findings and Recommendations for Streamlining Permitting New Sources of Water for Irrigation in Maine*. These recommendations came out after the Governor's budget was proposed, which already includes \$2M with \$300,000 ongoing to help establish the fund to help farmers adversely affected by drought conditions.

The amendment establishes and provides ongoing funding for three full-time, permanent positions: one within the Land Use Planning Commission; one within the Department of Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry's Bureau of Agriculture, Food and Rural Resources' Division of Agricultural Resource Development; and one within the Department of Environmental Protection's Water Withdrawal Program.

These positions will serve as important vehicles across two agencies to assist agricultural producers in making sustainable, environmentally sound irrigation improvements to their farms. It is anticipated that the combination of increased drought conditions in the growing season and funding to support Maine farmers in addressing drought relief will result in the need for more irrigation water source development. Likewise, the agencies will receive increased demand for technical assistance and permitting requests. DACF and DEP staff must be available and ready to meet these needs without

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delay, directing farmers to available funding, assisting in necessary technical evaluations, and guiding the completion of permit application forms. Overall, these staff resources complement the goal of the Farmers Drought Relief Fund by ensuring critical technical and regulatory support and guidance.

Multi-agency farm visits for technical assistance are very effective in evaluating options for and streamlining the permitting of new water sources. With current staffing, the State cannot form similar multi-agency response teams. New employees dedicated to this critical effort will ensure responsive, effective assistance to producers who seek to implement sustainable water resource management projects on their farms. Building state staff resources now is a pragmatic and proactive effort to assist our farmers in planning for and meeting the challenges of climate change. Without them, DEP and DACF will lack the capacity to effectively meet the needs of our farming community now and in the future.

I'd also like to take this opportunity to advise the Committee on what the Department is doing to set up the Farmer Drought Relief Fund program. We are using the \$75,000 in funding from LD 1998 to work with Dr. Rachel Schattman at the University of Maine to conduct a three-phase assessment of Maine agricultural constituents' drought and irrigation support needs. Dr. Schattman and her team are reviewing the Department's irrigation fund program from the early 2000s to understand its design, administration, and impact. They will then assess current water resource development needs and costs by analyzing the Maine Agriculture Drought Survey. They will also conduct numerous focus groups with agricultural stakeholders on stakeholder priorities for the fund. Dr. Schattman will present the team's findings and recommendations this spring. DACF will leverage these to build out the Drought Relief program through rulemaking this fall.

DACF anticipates that the program will financially address farmers' technical assistance needs to ensure sustainable water resource development (such as assistance in irrigation water management planning) and infrastructure projects.

We appreciate Senator Ingwersen moving these important recommendations forward, and I'd be happy to answer questions. We will also have staff available at the work session.