

Testimony of Jimmy DeBiasi, Executive Director, Maine Federation of Farmers' Markets, before the 131th Legislature's Joint Standing Committee on Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry

Good afternoon Senator Ingwersen, Representative Pleucker, and members of the Joint Standing Committee on Agriculture, Conservation, and Forestry. My name is Jimmy DeBiasi and I am here today on behalf of the Maine Federation of Farmers' Markets (MFFM) to speak in support of LD 568 – An Act to Provide Funding for the Fund to Address Food Insecurity and Provide Nutrition Incentives.

As Senator Pouliot mentioned, this funding appropriation also appears in the Governor's Budget, however the Governor's budget has this as a one-time allocation and we are advocating for this committee to support a continuous annual appropriation.

Maine Harvest Bucks increases the purchasing power of shoppers who spend SNAP directly with ME farmers at over 80 farmers' markets, farm stands, and CSA's. Thanks to MHB, people using SNAP are accessing healthy local food options with their SNAP dollars, and those food sales benefit 300+ local food producers from Presque Isle and Houlton, to Blue Hill, Farmington, and Kittery.

Just to note, MFFM administers the Maine Harvest Bucks program at 55 farmers' markets and farm stands across Maine. Our partners, Cultivating Community, MOFGA, and St. Mary's Nutrition Center manage Maine Harvest Bucks at other direct to consumer locations. Good Shepherd Food Bank, runs our sister program, Farm Fresh Rewards, which takes place at small stores. In the last 2 years, our collective sales and impact amounts to over \$2.3 million for the local food economy. Had we not been limited by a budget shortfall, we may have reached twice that amount in the last 2 years.

The federal funding for our program is changing this year, resulting in a funding gap of nearly \$200,000 for the farmers' markets community alone. This winter, we've had to ask farmers to help fundraise for the program at their local markets. State funding for our program will help leverage the federal grant dollars and substantially shrinks our annual funding gap. Many states across the country, including VT, NH, and MA, are supporting nutrition incentive programs with state funding appropriations. It's the sustainable trajectory for these programs, and it is a great investment in public health and local economies in all parts of Maine.

With state funding, we will be able to fully fund Maine Harvest Bucks and increase the benefit for shoppers in a time when SNAP allocations are dropping post-pandemic. Much of the funds will go towards buying fruits and vegetables from local farms, as it occurs when a shopper spends a Maine Harvest "Buck". Funds will also help cover the administrative costs to run MHB at markets. For example, just \$2500 worth of staffing at the Presque Isle Farmers' Market info booth (where the program is managed from) allowed for more than \$28,000 in SNAP and MHB sales for the vendors in 2022. That's an \$11 to \$1 return on investment. The ROI is even higher

at the Belfast Farmers' Market. Administrative funds support info booth staff costs, along with equipment and supplies expenses for the markets.

Additional funds will go towards establishing MHB at more locations across the state and towards promoting the program in partnership with Maine SNAP-Ed, DHHS, and other state-wide and local public health partners. This year, we're already planning to launch MHB in new locations, including Calais, Madawaska and Stonington.

SNAP & MHB sales at some markets can comprise as much as 15% to 40% of total sales. These markets are critical food access points for families and individuals using SNAP, and those same shoppers provide a vital income source for the local food producers at those markets. With Maine Harvest Bucks, we're boosting local economies and public health goals with the same dollar, and we're leveraging federal dollars along the way.

As our program succeeds and grows, so does our budget. State funds will help to ensure a baseline level of support to help MHB flourish and expand to new places. With MHB fully funded, we're building a world where local farmers can feed their entire community. People who struggle to afford a complete and healthy diet have the dignity to shop at, and enjoy, the farmers' market. Children and adults get to discover new foods and learn about them from their farmers and neighbors. The social, emotional, and community connections that are created by the farmers' markets are difficult to measure, but they are happening and they matter just as well.

Thank you.