

**Testimony of Cathy Karonis of Topsham before the 131<sup>st</sup> Legislature's Joint Standing Committee on Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry**

Good afternoon members of the Joint Standing Committee on Agriculture, Conservation, and Forestry.

My name is Cathy Karonis. I am a resident of Topsham, and I am here today as a Farmer to express my support of LD 568 - An Act to Provide Funding for the Fund to Address Food Insecurity and Provide Nutrition Incentives.

With my husband and son, I own Fairwinds Farm which is located in the towns of Topsham and Bowdoinham. We grow 125 acres of vegetables and small fruits which we sell year-round at Farmers Markets. We participate in the Brunswick Farmers Market; the Portland Farmers Market; the Brunswick Topsham Land Trust Farmers Market; the Yarmouth Farmers Market and the Brunswick Winter Market.

All of these markets are managed primarily by volunteers; with minimal paid staff. These markets all participate in the SNAP Program. The federal funding gap is going to require large fund-raising efforts by the markets and MFFM to make up for lost revenue. The combined funding needed for our markets alone is well over \$50,000. This winter, farmers from our markets are working to help raise these funds.

This reduction in funding will greatly lower the amount of assistance which we can offer to Farmers Market SNAP customers. The Harvest Bucks Program has especially been at the forefront of bringing SNAP customers to the markets. The one for one match, which had been offered up until last season, when the program was reduced, allowed SNAP customers to double their market money.

The SNAP Program gives incentives to customers to try shopping at farmers markets. It brings families with children to markets. In 2022, over 600 households experienced our markets because of this program. They accessed \$150,000 in high quality local food grown by their farmers through their SNAP and Maine Harvest Bucks dollars.

This program is an extension of the mission that we have; which is to help ease the burden of food insecurity. Every farmer that I know donates many, many pounds of food to local food pantries to help feed all members of our communities... and the SNAP Program is another avenue to help to achieve that mission.

Funding to continue the SNAP Program is needed to help cover the cost of Harvest Bucks Redemption; to cover funding to help promote the program to more community members; to cover the cost of EBT Equipment and Information Booth Volunteer Programs.

We would like to emphasize the importance of continuous funding at the \$600,000 level per year. Continuous funding will allow the farmers' markets and MFFM to plan for growth of the program without any funding uncertainties.

As farmers selling at markets, we are able to see first-hand how this program benefits families of our communities, as well as the farmers. There is no downside to this program.

We ask that you please support continued funding of this program.

Thank you.