

Testimony of Erica Emery of Farmington before the 131st 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 **Erica Emery**, I am a resident of **Farmington**, and I am here today as a **farmer** to express my support of LD 5688 - An Act to Provide Funding for the Fund to Address Food Insecurity and Provide Nutrition Incentives.

My farm, Rustic Roots Farm, has been a vendor at the Farmington Farmers Market for 10 years. Our market has had a Maine Harvest Bucks nutrition incentive program since 2018. This program has been a huge success in getting more fresh, local produce to low income shoppers who might otherwise not have shopped at the market. Our market runs the Maine Harvest Bucks program in a way that is similar to other markets across the state. We have an info booth at our market where SNAP shoppers pick up a shopping sheet from a paid staff person, they circulate the market to select their groceries, they swipe their SNAP card at the info booth at the end of their shopping trip, and they earn Maine Harvest Bucks as an incentive for spending their SNAP budget at the market. This increases the buying power for low income shoppers and translates to more sales for farmers.

For 2023, our market finds ourselves with a \$5,000 budget gap to continue to run the program. The primary expenses for this program are staff time for our info booth to administer transactions and a portion of the Maine Harvest Bucks incentive that the Maine Federation of Farmers Markets can't cover this year. Our market is rallying with some donated time from farmer vendors to try and keep our Maine Harvest Bucks program up and running. If this bill was funded, not only would the Maine Harvest Bucks program be continued but farmers could re-focus on what they do best, growing food for their communities, instead of fundraising during our busy spring season.

I love having the Maine Harvest Bucks program at our market because it meets an important need in our community, it allows our market to serve all members including low income shoppers. The majority of people that I see using this benefit are not only families trying to stretch their food dollars but also senior citizens living on a fixed income. As a farmer, I know that many of my products are more expensive than what you might find in grocery stores. Maine Harvest Bucks helps reduce the cost barrier for accessing fresh, local foods so we can truly serve all members of our community. I believe there is a lot of dignity in being able to choose between purchasing lettuce grown on the West Coast or purchasing lettuce grown by a farmer in your community, and to not have to feel a financial burden in making that choice. I have found that folks using their Maine Harvest Bucks at our farm stall are always excited to shop, eat local, and learn about how they can cook with some of our veggies. Maine Harvest Bucks also helps keep money local because when any shoppers spends money at the market or with our farm, those funds are reinvested locally through labor on farms and goods bought in our community.

About 19% of our farm's yearly market sales come from shoppers using SNAP and Maine Harvest Bucks to purchase vegetables. Our farm would be in a very tough spot if we lost this sector of our market shoppers.

Funding this bill would ensure that markets across the state can continue to feed folks at all income levels and give SNAP shoppers choice in deciding how they want to spend their food budgets. Funding this program would reduce the burden on farmers who organize their local markets and are now being put in the position this year to not only feed their communities but raise funds to do so. There is also so much potential for even more fresh, local produce to get on the plates and in the bellies of low income shoppers. Our market saw 79 new SNAP shoppers this year who had never shopped at the market before. Funding this bill allows for continued marketing and outreach to get more shoppers to market to get fresh, local, and nutritious food. Lastly, the Maine Harvest Bucks program is a very efficient use of resources. Funding an info booth at a market allows for shoppers at the Farmington Farmers' Market access to 12 different farm and food businesses all available in one spot at the same time. We would love to see you in person at the Farmington Farmers' Market on Saturday mornings and at the very least we hope that you are shopping at your local farmers' market. Thank you for your time.