



MOFGA Testimony In Favor of
LD 568 - *An Act to Provide Funding for the Fund to Address Food Insecurity and Provide Nutrition Incentives*

February 27, 2023

Good morning Senator Ingwersen, Representative Pluecker and members of the Joint Standing Committee on Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry. My name is Hillary Barter and I am Educational Programs & Policy Coordinator at the Maine Organic Farmers and Gardeners Association (MOFGA), where one of my responsibilities is to coordinate engagement in the Maine Harvest Bucks program by farmers who offer CSAs, or Community Supported Agriculture programs. MOFGA is creating a food system that is healthy and fair for all of us, and enabling increased access to food by all Mainers is an important part of this mission. I am speaking today in support of LD 568 - *An Act to Provide Funding for the Fund to Address Food Insecurity and Provide Nutrition Incentives*.

MOFGA works closely with our partners at the Maine Federation of Farmers' Markets, Cultivating Community, St. Mary's Nutrition Center, and Good Shepherd Food Bank to collectively manage nutrition incentive programs in the state of Maine. As I mentioned, MOFGA's role in the collaborative is to facilitate engagement in the Maine Harvest Bucks program by farms offering CSAs. Such programs, which are also called "farm shares", take various forms; usually, they are boxes of vegetables delivered weekly through the summer and fall, though some farmers offer them throughout the winter.

Our program is growing. We expect 20 farmers to participate this coming season, up from 10 in 2020, and these farms are located in 10 of Maine's 16 counties. In the 2022-23 season over \$80,000 in local food has been purchased directly from these participating farms using SNAP and Maine Harvest Bucks, up by \$20,000 from the previous season alone.

As you may know, the Maine Harvest Bucks program makes it possible for SNAP participants to stretch their SNAP funds, giving them bonus dollars to spend on fruits and vegetables for every dollar they spend on local foods. Within the CSA arm of this program, we have been fortunate to be able to offer bonus dollars on a 1:1 basis, meaning that SNAP participants pay 50% regular price for a vegetable CSA.

The impact of this discount on peoples' lives is significant. In a survey of participants in our farmers' CSA programs conducted last month, 100% of respondents said they were "able to afford essentials they might not otherwise be able to" due to their participation in the program. 97% said they found themselves eating more vegetables and 88% reported feeling healthier because they were able to afford a farm share. The CSA model surely does not work for everyone, as it involves a weekly commitment, can be a large quantity of vegetables, and for other reasons. But for the many people in Maine who participate year after year, the regular commitment enables new relationships with farmers and neighbors to form, and has *big* impacts on budgets and diets alike. When they can afford to eat quality, fresh food, people are better able to feel more secure and pursue their other goals.

To quote one participant,

"This program has impacted us greatly. We feel healthier, we've stopped buying so much processed food and cook more at home now than ever before. This program has made it so we can afford all the food we want to eat but normally can't afford."

This important program - and the other variations on nutrition incentives programs in Maine, like *Farm Fresh Rewards* - desperately needs your support. We are facing a substantial budget deficit due to the reduced availability of federal funding, as are similar programs nationwide. Administrators of similar programs in other states are also turning to their state governments to make it possible for these programs to continue. We need funding for the direct payments to farmers to cover the incentives themselves (the Maine Harvest Bucks portion of a transaction), as well as for program administration, outreach and, if possible, to help farmers with equipment costs. Our group of program partners needs an ongoing commitment from the State of Maine to support the

continuation of these programs at the \$600,000 level, so we can plan for, and steadily work towards, making these programs available to all who would like to utilize them.

Thank you so much for your consideration of this request.

The Maine Organic Farmers and Gardeners Association (MOFGA) started in 1971 and is the oldest and largest state organic organization in the country. We're a broad-based community that educates about and advocates for organic agriculture, illuminating its interdependence with a healthy environment, local food production, and thriving communities. We have 15,000 members, we certify more than 500 organic farms and processing facilities representing \$90 million in sales, and we are working hard to provide training and create opportunities for Maine's next generation of farmers. Each of these farmers is a Maine businessperson for whom economic health and environmental health are interdependent. While MOFGA envisions a future of healthy ecosystems, communities, people and economies sustained by the practices of organic agriculture, we attribute our success to collaboration and outreach to growers across the management spectrum.