



**Testimony of Shelley Megquier, Policy & Research Director, Maine Farmland Trust, to the 131st Legislature's Joint Standing Committee on Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry
March 15, 2023**

Good morning Senator Ingwersen, Representative Pluecker, and members of the Joint Standing Committee on Agriculture, Conservation, and Forestry. My name is Shelley Megquier and I am testifying today on behalf of Maine Farmland Trust (MFT) in support of LD 901 – Resolve, to Establish a Pilot Project to Support Farm Apprenticeships in Maine.

MFT is a member-powered statewide organization that works to protect farmland, support farmers, and advance the future of farming. Since our founding in 1999, MFT has helped to permanently protect more than 330 farms and keep nearly 60,000 acres of farmland in farming. In 2022 alone, MFT supported 48 farm businesses with workshops, technical assistance, and grants – delivering over 680 hours of technical assistance and \$309,000 in business and seed grants to help businesses grow their profitability. Our main program areas are Farmland Protection, Farmland Access, Stewardship, Farm Business Planning, PFAS Support, Climate Resilience, and Policy and Research.

The farmers we work with are strongly committed to sharing knowledge to build and sustain the next generation of farmers and the future of Maine agriculture. Many farmers in our network employ staff with whom they spend countless hours educating and training – often through mentor/mentee relationships that support on-farm learning and knowledge transfer. Farmers often provide this mentorship because they want to share their knowledge and love of what they do with others in order to support the continuity of the agriculture sector in Maine and ensure food security in the state.

LD 901 seeks to establish a pilot program that would provide grants to farmers so they can hire and compensate mentees or apprentices. In order to be eligible for the proposed program, interested farmers must have at least 5 years of farming experience, demonstrated commitment to sustainability and community, a defined list of education and training planned for their mentee, and a plan to hire them for at least 12 weeks, provide housing, and compensate in accordance with the state minimum wage. Grants would allow qualifying farmers the ability to receive financial support that would offset their labor costs, thereby rewarding them for their commitment to mentorship and knowledge sharing. One reason MFT supports this legislation is that both conventional farms and organic farms would be able to apply for grants as long as requirements were met, opening the door for a new grant opportunity for farmers who are not currently formally hosting apprentices but engaging in a comparable mentor/mentee relationship with staff over the course of a growing season. These grants would demonstrate state commitment to farmers sharing the knowledge they have through on-farm learning and building the expertise of the next generation of Maine farmers.

We often hear from farmers about the recurring challenge they have with labor supply and retention. Farmers increasingly face challenges finding labor they need, when they need it, and then often struggle to have enough of a profit margin to adequately compensate their staff. This legislation won't solve farm labor challenges, but it will provide some farmers with a new resource through the option of applying for a grant to support 1-2 workers each season. For some farmers, this additional resource could reduce the amount they pay out of pocket on compensation, boosting their profit margins. Having a range of tools and resources available and accessible is critically important as farmers work to grow and sustain robust, resilient businesses.

Although we support LD 901, we also want to encourage further thinking about what resources would be needed for effective management of this program by relevant state agencies. Part of effective management will be robust publicity for the program to ensure farmers of all types know about the new grant opportunity and are able to apply if they meet the eligibility requirements. In addition, to ensure that the program is available to conventional and organic farms, we encourage some minor revisions to the bill text to make the inclusion of conventional producers more explicit and clarify the list of practices that would lead to a farm meeting the "sustainability" definition. Lastly, to avoid confusion between this proposed program and other existing programs, the sponsors and Committee may want to consider alternative language to "apprenticeship".

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today to support LD 901. I'm happy to answer any questions you may have.