



STATE OF MAINE  
DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE, CONSERVATION & FORESTRY  
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TESTIMONY BEFORE THE JOINT STANDING COMMITTEE ON AGRICULTURE,  
CONSERVATION AND FORESTRY

Neither For Nor Against LD 901

*Resolve, to Establish a Pilot Project to Support Farm Apprenticeships in Maine*

March 13, 2023

Senator Ingwersen, Representative Pluecker, and members of the Joint Standing Committee on Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry, my name is Craig Lapine, and I am the Director of the Bureau of Agriculture, Food and Rural Resources. I am speaking on behalf of the Department of Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry (DACF) neither for nor against LD 901, *Resolve, to Establish a Pilot Project to Support Farm Apprenticeships in Maine*.

DACF's Bureau of Agriculture, Food and Rural Resources is dedicated to advancing Maine's agricultural interests. The Bureau supports Maine's farms through various functions, including technical assistance, business support, marketing and promotion, and targeted loan and grant programs. It helps create opportunities for farms to succeed in growing and marketing food and fiber and provides public education on the importance of Maine agriculture to the state's food supply, rural communities, economic development, and natural resource protection. The Bureau is a critical resource for farmers regarding the issues that concern them most.

It is no secret that Maine farms are significantly challenged by workforce constraints. Department-administered farm surveys consistently cite labor shortages as a primary concern regarding farm viability. At the same time, there is a growing demand for locally produced food, as well as opportunities to serve markets further afield, and a reliable and skilled workforce is needed to meet this demand. We also know that farm labor is only one of the concerns regarding farm viability. Farm businesses need to be financially successful to attract and retain employees.

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DACF strongly supports diverse efforts that can be found across the state that provide practical farming experience to youth and young adults in particular. Such programs exist within both public and private educational settings and the non-profit sector and help cultivate the next generation of farm workers and farm owners. While many individuals learn the daily responsibilities of farming by being raised on a farm, another important constituency is drawn to farming without this practical experience and without access to land. These individuals generally enter farming after being exposed to some hands-on educational activity. Apprenticeship programs can provide this opportunity.

DACF doesn't have a history of running an apprenticeship program. We lack the staffing, resources, and existing infrastructure to create, administer, and assess such a program. Further, responsible oversight and other parameters are needed to ensure farms receiving public funds have strong educational goals coinciding with sound labor practices. Such parameters will need to be thoughtfully crafted and in place before funds are disbursed, and the level of funding allocated to any such program would need to be sufficient to provide an appropriate level of oversight, which we believe would be higher than the amount listed in the fiscal note on this bill.

Lastly, if DACF administers the program, we want to ensure that Maine farms of all shapes and sizes are able to apply, as we see labor, education, and workforce as cross-cutting issue that impacts all Maine farming business.

I am glad to answer questions here or at the work session.