



**Testimony of Shelley Megquier, Policy & Research Director, Maine Farmland Trust, to the
131st Legislature's Joint Standing Committee on Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry
April 3, 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 the Amendment to LD 1274 – An Act to Increase Land Access for Historically Disadvantaged Populations.

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.

Land access is one of the most critical components of agricultural production. A farmer's success is often dependent upon their ability to find available land that is affordable and appropriate for farming. Centuries of structural and institutional racism have blocked Black farmers from equal access to land in a myriad of ways. It is important to recognize that land ownership in America, including in Maine, is inherently connected to a history of genocide and dispossession of Native peoples and forced labor from Black, Indigenous, and other people of color. Some of the dynamics of structural and institutional racism that contribute to unequal land access for people of color such as discriminatory policies, unequal access to capital, and exclusion from information and services continue on to this day. While some components of structural racism, such as enslavement and widespread violence against Black people that drove them off their land, are largely things of the past, the painful legacy of past violence and denials continue to shape present-day experiences and opportunities for Black people across the country, including Maine's Black farmers.

A survey conducted by the National Young Farmers Coalition found that, among 4,344 young farmers surveyed in 2022, finding affordable land to buy is the top challenge for young farmers. Purchasing land is even more challenging for Black young farmers, with 66% of Black respondents ranking finding affordable land as "very or extremely challenging" and 75% of Black farmers surveyed sharing that they currently need more access to land, whether to buy or lease.¹ Black farmers also disproportionately face obstacles in accessing credit. 59% of Black respondents to the National Young Farmer Survey said that finding access to capital was "very

¹ National Young Farmers Coalition (2022), National Young Farmer Survey. Accessed 3/25/23 at <https://www.youngfarmers.org/22survey/>

or extremely challenging”, as compared to 37% of White respondents. Student loan debt exacerbates this challenge with young Black farmers being nearly twice as likely than their White counterparts to be burdened by student loan debt.² These survey results clearly point to the need for targeted policy solutions that improve access to land for Black farmers, which is what LD 1274 seeks to do.

Maine-specific survey data also demonstrates a strong need for policy solutions such as LD 1274. According to the Permanent Commission on Racial, Indigenous, & Tribal Populations’ February 2022 report to this committee, Maine is plagued by racial disparity in economic security with over 53% of Black children in Maine living in poverty. Black Mainers are more likely to be food insecure and less likely to own their homes.³ The 2017 Census of Agriculture revealed that only 11% of Black farmers in Maine own the land that they cultivate.⁴ Lease agreements are often less reliable for farmers and can limit the long-term investments that farmers are able to make. In Maine, Black or African American farmers operate on leased land at much higher rates than other farmers. According to the 2017 Census of Agriculture, about 6% of all Maine producers farm only on leased land, while 85% of the 146 Black or African American farmers in Maine operate only on leased land.⁵

MFT supports LD 1274 which proposes two distinct but mutually reinforcing approaches to encourage the growth of Black farmers in the field of agriculture: a land grants program and an apprenticeship program. LD 1274 establishes the Black Farmer Restoration Program within the Department of Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry to support Black farmers accessing land and having increased opportunity to contribute to our food system. The Department would purchase agricultural land from willing sellers, protect the land through an agricultural easement, and then grant the land to an eligible farmer. Notably, the creation of Black or African American- and Wabanaki-specific grants and funding opportunities to aid in the purchasing of land was one of the recommendations of the February 2022 report, *Land Access for Indigenous & African American Farmers in Maine*. LD 1274 also establishes the Farm Conservation Corps to provide young people from socially disadvantaged groups with an entry into farming and agriculture through an apprenticeship program. The Farm Conservation Corps allows young people of color to gain practice experience and knowledge that will support them to pursue productive careers in agriculture.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today to support LD 1274. I’m happy to answer any questions you have.

² National Young Farmers Coalition, *Building a Future with Farmers 2022: Results and Recommendations from the National Young Farmers Survey*, (2022), available at: www.youngfarmers.org/22survey/

³ Permanent Commission on Racial, Indigenous, & Tribal Populations (2022), *Land Access for Indigenous & African American Farmers in Maine: Report to the Joint Standing Committee on Agriculture, Conservation, and Forestry*, available at: <https://www.pcritp.me/resources>.

⁴ United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), National Agricultural Statistics Service (NASS), *Census of Agriculture for 2017, Maine*, “Selected Farm Characteristics by Race of Principal Producers: 2017.” https://www.nass.usda.gov/Publications/AgCensus/2017/Full_Report/Volume_1,_Chapter_1_State_Level/Maine/

⁵ USDA, NASS, *Census of Agriculture for 2017, Maine*, “Summary by Tenure of Farm Operation, 2017.”