MAINE FARMLAND TRUST

Testimony of Shelley Megquier, Policy and Research Director, Maine Farmland Trust, before the 131th Legislature's Joint Standing Committee on Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry

April 10, 2022

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 LD 1227 – An Act to Balance Renewable Energy Development with Natural and Working Lands Conservation. We appreciate Representative Pluecker's efforts on this legislation and also support the amendments he has introduced.

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.

Protecting farmland in Maine is a principal part of our mission because we believe it is essential for ensuring that we have the land base to grow our agricultural economy, particularly as more farmers reach retirement age and development pressures increase across the state. Protecting land is also a key natural climate solution by avoiding the greater emissions associated with developed land, by ensuring we have the farmland needed to support our local and regional food economy and create food security for our state, and by preserving the climate benefits that can result from farmers using climate-friendly practices on the land.

Maine's farmland is a precious and limited resource. According to the last USDA Census of Agriculture report, between 2012 and 2017 Maine lost 10% of its farmland – that is over 145,000 acres of pastureland, cropland, and woodland.[1] This loss of farmland is troubling because farms provide many critical state and community benefits. Agriculture in Maine contributes over $3.6 billion in economic impact and supports over 27,000 jobs statewide according to an analysis by Farm Credit East.[2] Farms also provide many important benefits to the communities and regions in

[1] In 2012, Maine had 1,454,104 acres in farmland, but by 2017 that number had dropped to 1,307,566 acres – a loss of 146,491 acres or 10% of Maine's farmland. United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), National Agricultural Statistics Service (NASS), *U.S. Census of Agriculture for 2017*, Maine, https://www.nass.usda.gov/Publications/AgCensus/2017/Full_Report/Volume_1,_Chapter_1_State_Level/Maine/mev1.pdf.

[2] Farm Credit East, "Northeast Economic Engine: Agriculture, Forest Products and Commercial Fishing," (2020), available at: https://www.farmcrediteast.com/knowledge-exchange/Reports/2020%20Northeast%20Economic%20Engine.

which they are located, including the availability of local food and farm products, pastoral beauty, recreational access and enjoyment, as well as other environmental and educational benefits.[3]

MFT supports renewable energy production on farms as long as it does not significantly diminish the potential for agricultural production. On-site energy production can provide economic support to a farm, reduce the farm's energy costs, and is important for addressing climate change. But making sure we have the land base to support a robust local and regional food system – and food security in Maine – is also critical. As renewable energy development has increased in the state, so too has our understanding of the impacts that these projects can have on the amount of farmland taken out of agricultural production, the loss of important agricultural soils, and the competition for land that farmers need to lease in order to support their operations. MFT believes that solar generation and agriculture can co-exist symbiotically in Maine as long as solar siting is structured to balance these important interests.

Because of this belief, MFT was thrilled to participate in the Agricultural Solar Siting Stakeholder Group that was created by LD 820 and convened by the Maine Department of Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry (DACF) and the Governor's Energy Office (GEO) to develop consensus recommendations to incentivize the siting of solar energy projects that minimize impacts to valuable agricultural lands. LD 1227 and the amendments offered would advance key Stakeholder Group recommendations for supporting balanced solar development.

This legislation would create the opportunity to investigate the potential of dual-use solar projects in Maine through the creation of a pilot program focused on the integration of solar projects with agricultural production systems. This pilot program would allow for the establishment of a sufficient number of dual-use projects of varying sizes, in different locations, and involving different types of agriculture. In doing so, the pilot would allow DACF and its partners to collect data and determine how these projects affect agricultural production, and what kinds of benefits, costs, and support needs are associated with this type of development. Although some comparable pilots are ongoing in other states, this pilot program would allow Maine to build off the efforts of other states and test best practice approaches that are suited for Maine's specialty crops and unique environment. The collection of this data will be critical for determining whether and how agrivoltaics could be a viable model for shared food and solar production in the state.

The amendment provides added flexibility by authorizing the department, in coordination with the Governor's Energy Office, to get started with the pilot if they are ready to but maintains a report back to the legislature in February 2025. Importantly, the amendment also focuses on agricultural dual use projects, increases the possible size of the pilot program, and sets up the opportunity for DACF to accept funding from any source to develop or implement this effort. Lastly, the bill would also provide GEO with the resources it needs to create a publicly-accessible database of key characteristics of fully permitted or constructed energy projects which we believe is important so that land use trends can be identified and strategies can be created to avoid the over-development of important resources.

For these reasons, MFT hopes that you will support the amendment to LD 1227 and ensure that renewable energy generation and agriculture co-exist in Maine in a mutually beneficial manner.

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[3]Bunker, Amanda, et al. (2011). *Cultivating Maine's Agricultural Future: A Guide for Towns, Land Trusts, and Farm Supporters*. Maine Farmland Trust, American Farmland Trust & Mainewatch Institute, available at https://www.mainefarmlandtrust.org/public-outreach-new/public-policy/municipal-policy/.