



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 1285 – An Act to Extend Funding for the Land for Maine's Future Program.

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 vital for ensuring that agriculture remains a key component of Maine's way of life, with farms feeding our economy, stewarding our natural resources, and nourishing our communities. In fact, 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.¹ Unfortunately, farmland – the foundation of our farm businesses – is a precious and limited resource. Between 2012 and 2017, Maine lost 10% of its farmland – that is over 145,000 acres of pastureland, cropland, woodland and other agricultural land that is no longer being used by Maine farms.² Access to farmland, whether to buy or lease, is becoming increasingly difficult for Maine farmers due to dramatic increases in land prices, a growing interest in farmland from non-farming buyers, the rapid pace of solar development on agricultural land across the state, and the PFAS (per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances) contamination of farmland.

Protecting farmland is a critical tool not only for ensuring that we have the land base to support our farm economy, but for both increasing the financial security of farmers and increasing farmer access to land. Compensating farmers for protecting their land allows them to use the funds they receive to reinvest in the farm, pay off debt, or obtain some savings before passing

¹ 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>.

² 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.

the farm along to the next generation. And once land is protected, it can be sold at its agricultural value, making the farmland much more affordable for other farmers to purchase.

Protecting farmland is also important for preserving the many state and community benefits that farms provide. The state's climate action plan recognizes farmland conservation as a key natural climate solution by avoiding the greater emissions associated with developed land, by ensuring there is the land needed to create greater food security for our state, and by preserving the climate benefits that can result from farmers using climate smart practices on the land. Farms also provide many important benefits to the communities and regions in which they are located, including the availability of local food and farm products; pastoral beauty; recreational access for walking, hunting, fishing, swimming, sledding, and snowmobiling; as well as other environmental and educational benefits.³

In order for farms to continue to provide these important benefits, we must ensure there is sufficient farmland to support and grow Maine's food and agricultural economy. The Land for Maine's Future (LMF) Program is an important source of public funding for protecting Maine's forests, farmlands, and working waterfronts. Since its creation in 1987, LMF has protected over 600,000 acres, including 42 farms. Although MFT is grateful for the financial support LMF has provided to protect almost 10,000 acres of farmland within the state, we are not keeping pace with state-funded farmland protection efforts in other states in our region. According to American Farmland Trust's most recent *Status of State PACE Programs* report,⁴ Maine ranks second lowest in the Northeast⁵ in terms of the number of farmland acres protected with state funding. Only Rhode Island is lower than Maine with 8,131 acres protected compared to our 9,752, but Maine has roughly 1.3 million acres of farmland and Rhode Island has only about 60,000 acres total.⁶ In comparison, Vermont, which has a similar amount of farmland to Maine with 1.2 million acres, has protected 796 farms and 168,407 acres of farmland with their state program, which started at the same time as the LMF Program.⁷

MFT supports LD 1285 which provides robust, ongoing funding for the Department of Agriculture, Conservation, and Forestry, Land for Maine's Future program. This ongoing funding would increase the amount of funding available to support farmland conservation within Maine and could also be used to leverage important federal and private support to protect farmland and secure this critical resource for the people of Maine. In fact, every dollar of LMF funding is matched by other funds, historically attracting more than \$3 in matching funds for every dollar invested by the state. Regular and predictable funding through a multiyear allocation from the General Fund would provide farmland owners with increased certainty that public support will be there to successfully complete projects in a timely fashion, ensuring that the most important projects are completed.

³Bunker, 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. Retrieved from: http://www.farmlandinfo.org/sites/default/files/MainePlanningforAg_2011_1.pdf.

⁴ See American Farmland Trust (AFT), *Status of State Pace Programs* (January 2022), available at <https://farmlandinfo.org/publications/status-of-state-purchase-of-agricultural-conservation-easement-programs/>.

⁵ I am defining the Northeast region as New England plus New York and New Jersey.

⁶ *Status of State Pace Programs* (2022).

⁷ *Status of State Pace Programs* (2022)

Although MFT believes that increased state funding for farmland conservation is imperative, we also note that the efficient administration of farmland protection funding through the LMF Program will also be critical for supporting the viability of farm businesses while ensuring that the land stays in farming.

For all of these reasons, MFT hopes that you will support LD 1285 so that the LMF Program can provide the same robust support as other state land conservation programs in our region, and ensure that farmers have the land they need to continue to feed Maine's economy and people for generations to come.