



STATE OF MAINE
HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
SPEAKER'S OFFICE
AUGUSTA, MAINE 04333-0002
(207) 287-1300

RACHEL TALBOT ROSS
SPEAKER OF THE HOUSE

Wednesday, April 26th, 2023

Testimony of Speaker Rachel Talbot Ross presenting
LD 1670 An Act to Strengthen Maine's Agriculture, Food and Forest Economy by Funding the Maine Agriculture, Food and Forest Products Investment Fund and Amending Related Provisions of Law
Before the Joint Select Committee on Agriculture, Conservation & Forestry

Senator Ingwersen, Representative Pluecker and distinguished members of the Joint Standing Committee on Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry. I am Rachel Talbot Ross. I represent House District 118 which is the Portland peninsula and I also have the distinct honor of serving as the Maine Speaker of the House. I am here today to introduce LD 1670, An Act to Strengthen Maine's Agriculture, Food and Forest Economy by Funding the Maine Agriculture, Food and Forest Products Investment Fund and Amending Related Provisions of Law.

At its core, this bill is about economic development – specifically in the form of equitable investment in our food system. That includes critical infrastructure to ensure a climate- and pandemic-resilient food supply, which will also support good jobs and stronger communities right here in Maine. If we seize the current moment by investing in the future of Maine's food system, we can put more Maine-produced foods on plates in-state and beyond – by literally capitalizing on our state's reputation for and ability to produce and add value to pristine, quality food.

This bill completes work initiated in and advanced by the 129th and 130th Legislatures. The initial bill earned unanimous support from the committee and was headed for a floor vote when we unexpectedly adjourned due to the pandemic. The need for this proposal was reinforced by focus groups convened by a group of stakeholders, which centered on the needs and challenges facing Maine's agricultural sector. You will hear from some of those stakeholders today. I have learned through my entry into the world of farming and value-added food production that financing, be it for land, operating capital, or facility space, is inaccessible to most farmers and food businesses. Beyond that, the accessibility is

District 118: Portland neighborhoods of Parkside, Bayside, East Bayside, Oakdale and the University of Southern Maine Campus

inequitable. Business owners and entrepreneurs from disadvantaged backgrounds or historically marginalized population groups are just not able to bootstrap the American entrepreneurial dream without access to capital.

LD 1670 offers a solution to fill the capital gap for Maine's food industry. It draws on Vermont's Farm-to-Plate initiative and the Vermont Working Lands Enterprise Fund, which supports businesses building and modernizing critical processing infrastructure in order to fill gaps in the local supply chain. Vermont's model brings both the agricultural and economic development communities together to support the industry, and it has been incredibly successful. Between 2012 and 2022, Vermont invested \$13.6 million in 418 projects across every county in the state, leveraging \$22.5 million in private and matching funds and creating 539 jobs. As a result, they generated \$55 million in sales and were able to maintain 24,000 working acres. You will likely hear about Massachusetts's model today as well.

Each of our New England neighbors has some form of state investment in its food system. We have the potential to be a leader in these efforts to build regional supply chain capacity and resilience. As a state, we have recognized and highlighted the opportunity before us, including in the Maine Economic Development Strategy, 2020-2029: A Focus on Talent and Innovation, Maine's Climate Action Plan, Maine Won't Wait: A Four Year Plan for Climate Action (2020), and in recommendations of the Permanent Commission made to this committee in its LD 870 report back, "Land Access for Indigenous & African American Farmers".

Now it is time to act. LD 1565 in the 130th, which was passed in LD 1733, gave us the tools we need to realize this potential. It established the Maine Agriculture, Food and Forest Products Investment Fund to facilitate strategic, targeted investments in these industries. This fund needs to be capitalized. LD 1565 established an advisory board, which will represent a diversity of skills and backgrounds relevant to our food system and our agricultural and forest products industries.

The board will oversee the fund, implement related technical assistance programs and report to the Legislature on its work. Finally, the bill promotes interagency collaboration and public-private partnership by bringing stakeholders together to strengthen these industries and invest in the future. While the Fund is housed in DACF, the advisory board has the authority to outsource the fund to an economic development organization to ensure there is management capacity

regardless of which party controls the executive branch. This is essential for Maine farms and food producers. While we see these neighbors as local or regional businesses, they all compete in the global economy. These enterprises rely on access to capital and extensive infrastructure.

The system we envision will not happen spontaneously. It will take intention and resources that can be leveraged for additional impact. Some of Maine's foremost leaders in supporting and innovating around our agricultural and forest products sectors are here today to speak to how the benefits of this bill would ripple throughout our state economy. They can also speak to the complexities of competing in a global economy. That said, I would be happy to answer any questions you may have for me. Thank you for your consideration.