



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 26, 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 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*.

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.

MFT believes that to support Maine's rural economic development, farms must be economically viable. Over the years, MFT has collaborated with farmers, food businesses, and economic development organizations to establish enterprises and deliver a range of programs and services focused on establishing a vibrant and resilient agricultural sector and food system in Maine. We work directly with farmers of all experience levels as they develop markets and grow successful businesses. MFT's support services and programs for farmers include individualized farm business planning and workshops and technical assistance that are designed to help farmers develop their businesses strategically and scale up their wholesale operations to obtain more market resilience and economic stability. We also support the expansion of new markets that connect more Mainers with Maine-grown food.

In our work we have seen how Maine farmers need improved processing infrastructure and other innovative opportunities across all agricultural sectors to increase the supply of Maine-grown products and to create new market opportunities for local farms. For instance, the lack of meat processing capacity has been a long-standing challenge for livestock farmers in the state. As Maine's immigrant population grows, so too does the need for religiously and culturally appropriate meat processing, including halal processing. Expanding dairy processing capacity, particularly for value-added products and in proximity to dairy farms, could help dairy producers grow their businesses and lower costs. And the seasonality of fruit and vegetable production in the state requires innovation to produce shelf-stable local products that can feed Mainers and create market opportunities outside of the state all year long. The lack of food processing infrastructure weakens Maine's food and agriculture economy and serves as a challenge for individual farm businesses that are seeking to strategically scale up their operations.

At the same time, there is enormous growth potential for the food sector in Maine and the sectors that support it like farming. In fact, Governor Mills' 10-year economic development strategy identifies the food sector in Maine as one of the four areas most ripe for economic development because of the state's current strengths, the growing global demand, and the potential for job creation in that sector.¹ But investment in food processing infrastructure is a necessary first step to growing this important segment of Maine's economy. As the economic development strategy notes, "[f]rom aquaculture to traditional seafood harvesting to value-added food production, growth is anticipated in these food industries and Maine can benefit greatly by growing our capacity to meet these markets."² This type of investment will also be necessary to meet the state's new climate action plan strategy of "increase[ing] the amount of food consumed in Maine from state food producers from 10 percent to 20 percent by 2025 and 30 percent by 2030 through local food system development."³ This strategy recognizes the importance of growing our local food sector to ensure food security for the state given the supply chain disruptions that are anticipated to result from climate change in the future.

LD 1670 would help to provide the needed investment in Maine's food sector by capitalizing the Maine Agriculture, Food and Forest Products Investment Fund. This fund was established in the 130th Legislature to expand strategic infrastructure investments in the agriculture, food, and forest products economies. The \$20 million-dollar annual investment proposed in LD 1670 will support Maine's heritage industries, including agricultural producers and processors, by increasing access to new markets and opportunities through public-private partnerships. LD 1670 would also prioritize investments in historically marginalized, underrepresented, and underserved communities, in alignment with the recommendations of the Permanent Commission's 2022 Report on Land Access for Indigenous & African American Farmers by addressing the lack of access to capital and technical assistance that historically disadvantaged populations have had in food related industries. Based on their track record managing other funds, the Department of Agriculture, Conservation, and Forestry is poised with the experience and skills needed to effectively administer the Maine Agriculture, Food, and Forest Products Investment Fund. Lastly, we are optimistic about the way that LD 1670 will contribute to workforce development across Maine's agriculture and food economy – growing talent helps to address labor challenges as well as bringing new perspectives and the potential for new business innovations into the sector.

For all of these reasons, MFT hopes that you will support LD 1670 to ensure a sustained funding source for Maine's agriculture, food, and forestry sectors.

¹ *Maine Economic Development Strategy (2020-2029): A Focus on Talent and Innovation* (2019) at 14, available at: https://www.maine.gov/decd/sites/maine.gov.decd/files/inlinefiles/DECD_120919_sm.pdf.

² *Id.* at 18.

³ Maine Climate Council, *Maine Won't Wait, A Four-Year Plan for Climate Action* (Dec. 2020) at 13, available at https://www.maine.gov/future/sites/maine.gov.future/files/inline-files/MaineWontWait_December2020_printable_12.1.20.pdf.