



Testimony of Jimmy DeBiasi, Executive Director of Maine Federation of Farmers' Markets

LD 2093 - An Act to Address Food Insecurity by Helping Maine Residents Access Locally Produced Food

Good afternoon Senator Ingwersen, Representative Pleucker, and members of the Joint Standing Committee on Agriculture, Conservation, and Forestry. My name is Jimmy DeBiasi, and I am the Executive Director of the Maine Federation of Farmers' Markets (MFFM). MFFM is here in support of LD 2093 - An Act to Address Food Insecurity by Helping Maine Residents Access Locally Produced Food

MFFM administers the Maine Harvest Bucks program at 43 farmers' markets and 20 farm stands, from Kittery and Presque Isle to Stonington and Dover Foxcroft. Our program enables folks to use their SNAP at farm stands and farmers' markets - which are sometimes much closer than the nearest grocery store. When folks spend their SNAP at a participating location, they receive bonus bucks that can be spent only on local fruits and vegetables.

Since 2021, our collective programs are averaging \$1.2 million a year in additional sales to participating locations. We're just scratching the surface of potential sales and impact due to the uncertain and ever-changing nature of our baseline funding support. In 2021, with demand jumping during the pandemic, plus a change in USDA funding, we had to intentionally shrink the program to a 2:1 match - where a SNAP shopper spends \$2 in SNAP to earn \$1 in MHB. We also had to lean on farmers the past few winters to help fundraise to keep the program sustained at their markets even at this lower level.

We already have a taste of LD 2093, as last year's Governor's budget included a one-time appropriation towards this fund. This year, thanks to that appropriation, we are returning to a 1:1 match. This will immediately put more money in people's pockets for healthy food, and add more sales to farmers. Additionally, we are planning large outreach projects in collaboration with ME DHHS, SNAP-ED, WIC, Senior Farmshare, and other local partners across the state. We are on track to double the number of people we serve, up to 25,000 Mainers. Lastly, we are investing in strategies that will make our program easier to launch and manage at any farmers' market in Maine - so farmers don't have an extra job to fulfill during market day or in the winter time. We are able to do this thanks to the Governor's budget appropriation last year. However, without permanent baseline funding, we cannot make these sustained investments last.

We need a reliable, permanent appropriation and there is a strong economic case for it. Farmers' markets are a low-barrier entry point for small businesses. LD 2093 will boost farm viability and market viability, which allows for more farms and food enterprises to enter the local

food economy. We estimate that there are over 350 small farm and food businesses at farmers' markets in Maine employing over 1500 people. These state funds help leverage federal dollars on an average of \$3:\$1. The US Congressional Budget Office determined that nutrition incentive programs actually save the federal government money on Medicare & Medicaid costs due to improved health outcomes. Our own shopper surveys indicate improved health among participants, as well as a reduced need for the emergency food system. As we like to say: **We can pay the farmer or we will pay the doctor.**

To be clear, LD 2093 will go to supporting the following costs, which are listed in terms of priority:

- Funding the incentives to buy fruits and vegetables from local farms
- Supporting EBT equipment costs
- Supporting administrative costs to reduce the burden on farmers
- Promoting the program
- Responding to emerging technologies to create efficiencies & streamline the costs to administer the program

LD 2093 is integral to Maine's Climate Action Plan & Ending Hunger by 2030 plan. This bill is an investment in local economic resilience, thriving local food economies, healthier Mainers, and more connected communities, and it will pay dividends for decades to come.

Please help us secure this permanent fund for local food nutrition incentives.

Thank you for your time and service to the people of Maine.

Respectfully,

Jimmy DeBiasi
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