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**TESTIMONY BEFORE THE JOINT STANDING COMMITTEE ON AGRICULTURE,
CONSERVATION AND FORESTRY**

NEITHER FOR NOR AGAINST LD 2093

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

January 22, 2024

Senator Ingwersen, Representative Pluecker, and members of the Joint Standing Committee on Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry, my name is Michelle Webb. I am the Agriculture Resource Development Director within the Bureau of Agriculture, Food and Rural Resources. I am speaking on behalf of the Department of Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry (DACF) Neither For Nor Against LD 2093, *An Act to Address Food Insecurity by Helping Maine Residents Access Locally Produced Food*.

The Fund To Address Food Insecurity and Provide Nutrition Incentives increases access to Maine-grown healthy foods by incentivizing federal food and nutrition assistance program participants to purchase Maine-grown fruits and vegetables. At separate times, the Legislature and the Governor have each taken action to offer one-time funding to capitalize this Fund.

As written, LD 2093 extends the Fund's appropriation beyond the 2023-2024 and 2024-2025 fiscal years by establishing ongoing funding of \$1,200,000 per fiscal year to be used to match contributions from private and public sources. The Department understands that LD 2093 will boost the state's ongoing efforts to increase local food consumption and enhance access to Maine-grown foods through various market channels.

The Department serves several important constituencies. Chief among them are farmers, whom we serve with technical assistance, food safety resources, financial tools, grant programs, market development support, and more. Another constituency is the people of Maine experiencing food insecurity. We serve these people with programs like Maine Senior FarmShare, the Emergency Food Assistance Program, Hunters for the Hungry, and others.

LD 2093 is about maintaining and supporting programs that are textbook "win-win" situations for these two important constituencies. They create additional markets for Maine growers, and they lower barriers to healthy food for Maine families.

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Programs exist within the USDA that encourage people who use nutrition benefits like SNAP and WIC to spend their benefits on local foods. For over a dozen years, Maine organizations have successfully leveraged these resources to create incentive programs like Farm Fresh Rewards, which incentivizes purchases at retail outlets, and Maine Harvest Bucks, which incentivizes purchases in direct-to-consumer settings like CSAs and farmers' markets. A barrier presented by some of these programs is the match required from grantees seeking to access these funds. In 2022, the USDA made \$59 million available for the largest of these incentive programs, the Gus Schumacher Nutrition Incentive Program (GusNIP). However, the value of the incentives Maine organizations could apply for was sharply curtailed by the requirement to match every federal dollar with a local dollar. It is our understanding that ongoing funding of \$1.2 million will allow Maine organizations to leverage at least that amount of federal dollars to be spent on Maine-grown fruits and vegetables annually.

Programs that encourage Maine SNAP recipients—who are overwhelmingly comprised of seniors, the disabled, and working families with children—to spend more of their benefits on healthy, Maine-grown food have immense, positive impacts on our farms and our communities. We see the value in the state partnering in these efforts.

In addition to the economic benefit for farmers and the health benefits for consumers, there is another important reason to support initiatives that increase the consumption of local produce. The Maine Climate Action Plan, under Strategy D “Grow Maine’s Clean-Energy Economy and Protect Our Natural-Resource Industries,” includes action item D1.3: “Increase the amount of food consumed in Maine from state food producers to 30% by 2030 through local food system development.” Currently, the overwhelming majority of food consumed in Maine – including that purchased with federal food benefits – is not grown in Maine.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify. I’m happy to answer questions now and at the work session.