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

IN SUPPORT OF LD 579

An Act to Support Farmland Conservation and Transition Planning for Farmers

January 17, 2024

Senator Ingwersen, Representative Pluecker, and members of the Joint Standing Committee on Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry, my name is Craig Lapine, and I am the Director of the Bureau of Agriculture, Food and Rural Resources (BAFRR) within the Maine Department of Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry (DACF). I am speaking in favor of LD 579, *An Act to Support Farmland Conservation and Transition Planning for Farmers*, as amended.

LD 579 aims to enhance and strengthen the Working Farmland Access and Protection Program (WFAPP), which resides in BAFRR, to better support farmland conservation in Maine. It does this primarily by creating a dedicated farmland protection position within the Bureau and secondarily by effecting an administrative change by establishing a WFAPP account within the Bureau—a change that opens the door for new flexibility and creativity in how we approach farmland protection.

The benefits of farms and farmland to our state and its people are numerous, from economic, cultural, environmental, and educational benefits to providing local and regional food security, educational opportunities, aesthetic values, and critical wildlife habitat. The Maine Climate Action Plan, *Maine Won't Wait*, recommends that 30% of our natural and working lands in Maine be conserved by 2030 and that local food consumption be increased to 30% by 2030. While we currently count 22% of such lands as conserved, much of the land in that figure is working forestland and recreational lands. Approximately 3.6% of our farmland is protected at this time, which lags far behind many other states in the Northeast. Permanently securing farmland is critical to ensuring Maine meets its goals.

Unfortunately, between 2012-2017, Maine lost over 140,000 acres of farmland.¹ This bill can help modulate future farmland loss by enabling creativity and flexibility in farmland

1. 2017 Agricultural Census, National Agricultural Statistics Service, USDA.

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conservation programs. It enhances the WFAPP Program by allowing it to be more creatively, rapidly, and broadly deployed throughout the state.

I note that bill, as written, would not change WFAPP's current role in advising the Commissioner on farmland protection projects to recommend for funding to the Land for Maine's Future board. It does, however, include one full-time staff person to help support a broader purpose and impact of the WFAPP program. Increased capacity for this program was also identified as a priority within the LMF Government Evaluation Act report. The proposed position is key to expanding DACF's capacity to prevent the loss of farmland in the state. Currently, the Bureau's Farm Viability and Farmland Protection Specialist can dedicate only about 15% of her time to protection projects because of all the grantmaking, technical assistance, and other critical farm viability tasks that fall to that position, including overseeing the Maine Farms for the Future program, which has maintained a strong interest among farmers year after year. With dedicated staffing, we will be able to pursue additional sources of funding to broaden our ability to better achieve the goals of WFAPP.

Additionally, this bill creates a new sub-account within the current program in BAFRR. This new sub-account will allow the WFAPP program to access new and additional resources to strengthen farmland protection in Maine. The new sub-account will be funded through other private and public sources that the Department works to secure. Funding that complements what LMF is able to do could allow DACF to play a more integral role in supporting efforts to prevent the loss of farmland due to conversion to non-agricultural uses, and engage in discussions that shape current and future tools used for farmland protection, while seeking and advocating for federal and other sources of funding. Additionally, this new sub-account would not require a match from the applicant, removing a potential barrier to farmland protection.

We urge the Committee to support this bill. I am happy to answer any questions you may have now or at the work session.