



American Farmland Trust

Testimony before the Joint Standing Committee on Agriculture, Conservation, and Forestry
By Chelsea Gazillo, American Farmland Trust, New England Policy Manager
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RE: Support for LD 579 – An Act to Support Farmland Conservation and Planning for Farmers

Senator Ingwersen, Representative Pluecker, and members of the Joint Standing Committee on Agriculture, Conservation, and Forestry, thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony in **support of LD 579.**

My name is Chelsea Gazillo, and I am American Farmland Trust's (AFT's) New England Policy Manager. AFT is the nation's leading conservation organization dedicated to protecting farmland, promoting sound farming practices, and keeping farmers on the land. Since its founding in 1980 by farmers and citizens concerned about the rapid loss of farmland to development, AFT has helped protect over 6.5 million acres of farmland and has led the way for the adoption of conservation practices on millions more. Established in 1985, AFT's New England office works to save the land that sustains us across the region.

Maine's (ME's) farmland plays a vital role in our regional economy and food security. ME has the most agricultural land of any of the six New England states by far, as well as the largest amount of prime and important farmland. According to AFT's Farms Under Threat: The State of the States, roughly 18,000 acres of ME's agricultural land were converted to urban development or low-density residential land use between 2001 and 2016. This loss of farmland is enough to generate \$10 million in annual revenue. To date, ME has protected less than five percent of the state's farmland. Additionally, without adequate tools for additional farmland protection efforts in ME, according to AFT's Farms Under Threat 2040, an estimated 53,400 acres of ME's farmland will be lost to development in the next 17 years.

Protecting ME's local farms provides the state with long term food security, meaning that no matter what disruptions impact the global food system, local food can still be grown for Mainers. Conserved farmland benefits all ME residents, and especially all farmers – both multi-generational farms and new farms, while the state's food system is supported by mostly small, family-owned businesses. In short, more must be done to address the growing threats to ME's farmland, including real estate development pressures, land loss due to a changing climate, and high land prices. It is important to note that local farms do not compete with housing demands, as these farms are generally located away from areas where housing is needed most.

LD 579 will create more opportunities for the State to expedite the pace of farmland protection through the Department of Agriculture, Conservation, and Forestry (DACF)'s Working Farmland Access and Protection Program.

Farmland Protection will be critical to the future of ME's local food system

ME's farmland directly supports the state's economy with over 7,600 farm businesses, close to 13,700 producers and 15,600 farm laborers, and \$667 million in direct revenue. Conserved

farmland benefits all ME residents, and especially all farmers – both multi-generational farms and new farms, while ME’s food system is supported by mostly small, family-owned businesses. As of January 2023, according to AFT’s Purchase of Agricultural Conservation Easement (PACE) Survey, the ME Farmland Protection Program has permanently protected 42 farms, or 9,752 acres of farmland, with agricultural conservation easements. Since 1987, ME’s Farmland Protection efforts have been funded through the Land for Maine Future’s bond. To date, the state has deployed over \$12.5 million in state funding, and has attracted an additional \$22 million in matching funds from private land trusts and both federal and municipal sources. This number is in stark comparison to the Massachusetts Agricultural Preservation Restriction (APR) Program, which has allocated over \$245 million towards farmland protection efforts.

ME’s farmland protection and access efforts will be a key component of the state’s strategies to combat climate change. Human activity on an acre of farmland produces 66 times fewer Green House Gas emissions than that on an acre of developed land, and participation in farmland protection programs has been proven to encourage the adoption of new, improved, and more widespread regenerative farming practices. Farmland provides a range of reliable, cost-saving environmental and climate-resilient services, such as preservation of open space, air pollution removal, wildlife habitat, flood mitigation, and carbon sequestration. LD 579 is very much in alignment with the goals outlined with the December 2020 Maine Won’t Wait Plan, which outlines protecting Natural and Working Lands and Water as the number one goal to promote natural climate solutions in the state. Passing this legislation is also timely because the Maine Climate Council is currently meeting to update this plan.

Updating LD 579 will be a technical fix that will not only be good for the environment and agricultural producers in the state but will also help leverage federal resources through the United States Department of Agriculture’s Natural Resources Conservation Service (USDA-NRCS). The 1996 Farm Bill created a pilot Farm and Ranchland Protection Program (FRPP) which allowed for federal funds to be used to purchase agricultural conservation easements. This pilot program eventually became ACEP-ALE in the 2014 Farm Bill and continued in the 2018 Farm Bill. Today, the program uses federal funds to match state dollars to protect agricultural land in perpetuity. If passed, LD 579 will allow the state to leverage additional funding for farmland protection and access through the USDA-NRCS ACEP-ALE program. In 2022, Congress passed the Inflation Reduction Act which allocated \$1.4 billion to ACEP. ME can successfully leverage funding from ACEP-ALE if the state has an adequate match to provide for the purchase of a conservation easement.

LD 579 will also allow ME to join other State PACE programs in the region who have become certified USDA-NRCS ACEP-ALE certified entities. An eligible entity is an agency of a state or local government, an Indian Tribe, or a non-profit/ nongovernmental organization organized for the purpose of land preservation and who has the authority to purchase and hold agricultural land easements. NRCS employs a national certification process through which eligible entities may receive administrative flexibility when participating in ACEP-ALE. This certification process can help expediate the amount of time it takes from the date a project becomes enrolled with USDA-NRCS to the time the farmer is paid for the sale of their easement. For farmers who are dependent on money to support their immediate needs, this can be critical. Since becoming a certified entity in 2023, the CT Department of Agriculture went from closing on nine easements in 2022 to twenty-three easements in 2023. LD 579 would allow the agency to become a certified ACEP-ALE entity and administer this critical funding to producers.

AFT also supports adding a full-time staff member to oversee DACF's farmland protection and access efforts. A dedicated staff person will ensure that project proposals receive the attention they need for landowners to receive funding through the program in a timely manner.

As an organization that has actively been involved with state farmland protection efforts for over 40 years, we can attest that farmland protection keeps land in farming permanently, while supporting a more economically and ecologically resilient agricultural sector. Studies show that farmers use farmland protection funds to invest in business viability and innovation, most frequently using them to pay down debt, put money towards saving, purchase leased land, expand, and diversify their operations, upgrade farm equipment, and/or transfer farms to the next generation. Protecting farmland also encourages other local farmers and business owners to invest in their own operations because they have greater confidence in the stability and longevity of the local farm sector.

Farmland access is exceptionally challenging for ME farmers

As ME looks towards further building a robust, equitable, and resilient agricultural economy, farmland affordability and accessibility are cardinal to these efforts. ME's new and beginning farmers are at the crux of ensuring that the state's agricultural sector continues for future generations. According to recent reports published by both the American Farm Bureau Federation and the National Young Farmer's Coalition, access to affordable farmland remains one of the main barriers to new and young farmers, especially Black Farmers, Indigenous Farmers, and other Farmers of Color (BIPOC) to start a farm and remain viable.

According to the 2023 National Agricultural Statistic Service Land Values Survey, the median cost of farmland per acre in the state is \$2,880 per acre, an almost 1% increase from 2022. While the average price of farmland per acre is low compared to the rest of region, continuing to expand farmland access tools for young, beginning, and historically marginalized farmers will be critical. Farmland protection is a tool that can be used to lower the cost of a farm and thus make it more accessible to farmers seeking land.

Let's start promoting farmland for the future

Lastly, according to a recent report released by New England Feeding New England titled "[A Regional Approach to Food System Resilience](#)", it is estimated that nearly 1 million acres of land will need to be brought back into agricultural production if New England wants to produce thirty percent of the food consumed in our region by 2030. The same report also suggests that most of the farmland in the region is located in ME and Vermont. By passing LD 579, ME has the opportunity to support a more robust state and regional food system alike.

As a national and regional leader in farmland protection, American Farmland Trust fully supports this legislation and urges this committee to pass it this legislative session. If you have any questions, please feel free to reach out to me at cgazillo@farmland.org or (707) 495-8223. Thank you for your time.

With sincere regards,
Chelsea Gazillo

American Farmland Trust is an agricultural non-profit organization with a mission to save the land that sustains us by protecting farmland, promoting sound farming practices, and keeping farmers on the land. AFT is the only national agricultural organization that approaches its work in this comprehensive, holistic manner. We recognize the connection between the land, forward-looking farming practices, and the farmers who do the work.