



MOFGA Testimony In Support Of

LD 579 - An Act to Support Farmland Conservation and Transition Planning for Farmers

January 17, 2024

Good morning Senator Ingwersen, Representative Pluecker and members of the Joint Standing Committee on Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry. My name is Heather Spalding and I am deputy director of the Maine Organic Farmers and Gardeners Association (MOFGA). A broad-based community, MOFGA is creating a food system that is healthy and fair for all of us. Through education, training and advocacy, we are helping farmers thrive, making more local, organic food available and building sustainable communities. MOFGA certifies 525 organic farms and processing operations representing roughly \$90 million in sales and we are working hard to create opportunities for Maine's next generation of farmers. Each of these farmers is a Maine businessperson for whom economic health and environmental health are interdependent.

MOFGA supports LD 579 because Maine's farmland is precious and finite, and it's a critical aspect of a food system that is healthy and fair for all. Maine must ensure a land base with continuously improved soil quality in order to have a thriving and resilient agricultural economy that provides a nutritious and delicious diet for all people in Maine and many beyond.

Farmland is under serious threat of development and pollution. According to the most recent US Census of Agriculture, Maine lost more than 10% of its farmland (146,491 acres) between 2012 and 2017. We anticipate further losses with the next census report. Maine Farmland Trust's recently released journal *Maine Farms*, reports that Maine is way behind other states in the Northeast when it comes to farmland preservation. Maine has 54,208 acres of protected land (less than 5% of Maine farmland) compared to Massachusetts with 74,775, New York with 95,738, Vermont with 169,407, New Jersey with 248,411, and Pennsylvania with 611,620. Similarly, Maine is way behind all of these states with farmland protection funding.

Maine has many programs in place to improve our standing with farmland protection but we need dedicated funding and staffing to accelerate the effort. LD 579 would authorize Maine's Department of Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry (DACF) to manage an account for public-private partnership funding in support of the Maine Working Farmland Access and Protection Program. It also would provide permanent funding for a DACF staff position to manage this program.

Increasing Maine's farm conservation easements will help move Maine toward the climate action plan goal of conserving 30% of Maine land by 2030. I serve on the Natural and Working Lands Working Group of the Maine Climate Council and we are focusing on how to achieve the Plan goal of increasing the amount of food produced and consumed in Maine to 30% by 2030. We think we're at about 10% now and we recognize that farmland preservation is essential if we are going to increase our self-reliance in the food and agriculture system.



Many of the new farmers who participate in our farm training programs are feeling the pressures of diminishing farmland access. Consistently one of the top challenges that our new farmers face is access to farmland due to escalating land prices and development. LD 579 would increase Maine's capacity to conserve our precious and finite farmland for current and future farmers so we can have a food system that is healthy and fair for all of us.

Thank you very much for your consideration of this important legislation. MOFGA urges the Committee to vote in support of LD 579. I would be happy to answer questions if you have any.

The Maine Organic Farmers and Gardeners Association (MOFGA) started in 1971 and is the oldest and largest state organic organization in the country. We're a broad-based community that educates about and advocates for organic agriculture, illuminating its interdependence with a healthy environment, local food production, and thriving communities. We have 15,000 members, we certify more than 500 organic farms and processing facilities representing \$90 million in sales, and we are working hard to provide training and create opportunities for Maine's next generation of farmers. Each of these farmers is a Maine businessperson for whom economic health and environmental health are interdependent. While MOFGA envisions a future of healthy ecosystems, communities, people and economies sustained by the practices of organic agriculture, we attribute our success to collaboration and outreach to growers across the management spectrum.