



**Testimony of Shelley Megquier, Policy and Research Director, Maine Farmland Trust, before the 131<sup>th</sup> Legislature's Joint Standing Committee on Agriculture, Conservation, and Forestry**

January 17, 2024

Good morning Senator Ingwersen, Representative Pluecker, and members of the Agriculture, Conservation, and Forestry Committee. My name is Shelley Megquier and I am testifying on behalf of Maine Farmland Trust (MFT) in support of the LD 579 – for which the amended title is *An Act to Support Farmland Conservation*.

MFT is a member-powered statewide organization that works to protect farmland, support farmers, and advance the future of farming. Since our founding in 1999, MFT has helped to permanently protect more than 340 farms and keep over 60,000 acres of farmland in farming. Our Farm Network includes over 500 farms and in 2023, MFT supported 58 farm businesses with workshops, technical assistance, and grants – delivering over 612 hours of technical assistance and \$197,000 in business and seed grants to help businesses grow their profitability. Our main program areas are Farmland Protection, Farmland Access, Stewardship, Farm Business Planning, PFAS Support, Climate Resilience, and Policy and Research.

Farmland is the foundation for thriving farm businesses, communities, and rural economies. But, farmland in Maine is at risk of being lost to agriculture due to increasing development pressures, a growing interest in farmland from non-farming buyers, dramatic increases in the cost of land, and farm viability challenges that are making it harder for farmers to afford to keep their land in agriculture. Protecting farmland through a conservation easement keeps land available for agricultural use and creates more affordable access to farmland for both new and established farmers. Conservation is critical to ensure that we have the land base needed to grow our agricultural economy, strengthen food security, and build resilience to climate change for our state and communities.

Organizations like Maine Farmland Trust and other land trusts leverage public and private resources to complete farmland protection projects. Though most of Maine's farmland conservation has been achieved with philanthropic support, the Land for Maine's Future (LMF) Program, Maine's primary public funding vehicle for land conservation, and the recently formed Working Farmland Access and Protection Program, administered by the state's Bureau of Agriculture, Food and Rural Resources also form important pieces of the puzzle. Maine has conserved more than 54,000 acres of farmland which is an important achievement that has positively impacted countless farm families and communities across the state. But unfortunately, Maine lags far behind many other states in the Northeast in the number of farms protected by conservation easements, the acres of farmland protected, and the percentage of the state's existing farmland that is under conservation. **Less than 5 percent** of Maine's farmland is currently protected – this is lower than most states in the Northeast, and is the lowest amount by far of any state in New England.

Maine lags behind due to a lack of public investment in farmland protection as is demonstrated by the below chart.

<b>Farmland Protection Funding*</b>			
<b>State</b>	<b>Total Funding</b>	<b>State Funding</b>	<b>Other Funding</b>
Massachusetts	\$322,068,472	\$245,290,621	\$76,777,851
Vermont	\$222,453,676	\$91,249,621	\$131,204,055
Connecticut	\$181,952,895	\$133,429,955	\$48,522,940
Rhode Island	\$120,234,645	\$38,209,630	\$82,025,015
New Hampshire	\$56,753,734	\$20,563,845	\$36,189,889
Maine	\$50,222,483	\$12,574,122	\$37,648,361**

Data sources: \*American Farmland Trust (2023), "Status of State PACE Programs"

\*\*Maine Farmland Trust spending analysis

We need to rapidly expand our farmland protection efforts in the state, particularly publicly funded farmland protection in order to stave off increasing development pressures and ensure that farmers can continue to access the land they need for agricultural production. One of the ways that we can advance farmland protection efforts in Maine is to strengthen the Working Farmland Access and Protection Program within the Department of Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry's Bureau of Agriculture, Food, and Rural Resources, which is what LD 579 seeks to do.

The Maine Working Farmland Access and Protection Program was established in 2021 to provide protection to strategically significant working farmland properties whose continued availability to commercial agricultural businesses is essential to the long-term future of this sector of Maine's economy. LD 579 seeks to establish a separate account administered by the Department of Agriculture, Conservation, and Forestry to support public-private partnerships to carry out the purposes of the Working Farmland Access and Protection Program. A separate account would offer the Department an additional tool to support farmland conservation, essentially adding flexibility within the Program for smoother and more robust implementation.

The bill also seeks funding for a staff person dedicated to running the Program. MFT knows from firsthand experience that agricultural easements take time and expertise to put into place. It takes significant time and energy to close a project and farmers deserve responsive staff, quick turnarounds, and tailored easement terms whenever possible – all things that can be better accomplished with an additional skilled staff person within the Program. We also see an opportunity for the Access portion of the Working Farmland Access and Protection Program to be more strongly developed with added staff capacity. Farmland protection can be a tool that improves access to farmland by making it more affordable but it should be one component of a broader set of strategies. Additional staff capacity could help the Department develop access strategies for different subsets of Maine's agricultural community.

To close, we support LD 579's effort to add staffing capacity and greater flexibility in administration of the Working Farmland Access and Protection Program. This bill will lay important groundwork to enable the State to accelerate progress on farmland conservation.

Thank you very much. Please reach out if you have any questions or follow-ups.