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*Testimony of Speaker Rachel Talbot Ross presenting*  
**LD 2212, An Act to Strengthen Maine's Agriculture, Food System and Forest  
Products Infrastructure Investment**

*Before the Joint Standing Committee on Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry*

Good afternoon Senator Ingwersen, Representative Pluecker and esteemed members of the Joint Standing Committee on Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry. My name is Rachel Talbot Ross. I represent House District 118, and I serve as Speaker of the House. I am proud to present before you **LD 2212, An Act to Strengthen Maine's Agricultural, Food System and Forest Products Infrastructure Investment Advisory Board**.

This bill joins a legislative effort to which I have been committed for several years: facilitating economic development through targeted, equitable investment in our food system. To accomplish this goal, I introduced in the 130th Legislature a bill to create the Maine Agriculture, Food & Forest Products Investment Fund, which supports public-private partnerships that strengthen the State's agricultural, food and forest products economy. The Fund's authorizing legislation also established the Maine Agriculture, Food System, and Forest Products Infrastructure Investment Advisory Board to oversee and determine expenditures from the Fund, and to collaborate with the Department of Economic and Community Development and other appropriate agencies and organizational partners to ensure that investment objectives are appropriately targeted and not duplicative and to establish various grant and loan instruments as part of the Fund.

That initiative, which was folded into the budget that year and further funded with \$500,000 through LD 1670 in the First Regular Session of the 131st Legislature, was inspired by Vermont's Farm To-Plate initiative and the Vermont Working Lands Enterprise Fund, which supports businesses-building and modernizing critical processing infrastructure in order to fill gaps in the local supply chain; our goals were to bring together both agricultural industry and economic development partners to expand opportunities in the in the agricultural, food and forest products economy, with a particular focus on small businesses and on historically disadvantaged communities. By making such critical investments, we can grow the resiliency of Maine's food

supply and production chain through strategic investments and build upon existing industry efforts from Maine-based organizations to propel innovation, business growth and job creation in early-stage and start-up food processing and manufacturing businesses. These businesses, many of which form the backbone of our heritage industries, employ local people and source from Maine growers and producers, multiplying each investment. I'll underscore that the vision of this fund is to grow strong, comprehensive systems right here in Maine; for along every step of the process, from production to manufacturing to assembly and beyond, all Mainers are invested in some way in our food systems, and all Mainers stand to benefit from the work that we do here.

To optimally prepare the Fund for its work, the bill before you today to accomplish the following:

1. First, this bill amends the laws governing the Maine Agriculture, Food System and Forest Products Infrastructure Investment Advisory Board to require the President of the Senate and the Speaker of the House to appoint members to the board and prohibit a member of the board who holds a position in a producer or business that causes a conflict of interest with regard to a vote the board is holding from participating in that vote. It also requires producers of agricultural, food and forest products receiving disbursements from the Maine Agriculture, Food and Forest Products Investment Fund to obtain their primary agricultural, food or forest products from within the State.
2. Second, this bill provides a one-time appropriation of \$10,000,000 in fiscal year 2024-25 to the fund.

I'll address in some more detail each of the changes to the Advisory Board. First, it adds a requirement that the President of the Senate and the Speaker of the House appoint members to the board. As of now, the board consists of the Commissioner of the Department of Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry or the commissioner's designee, the Commissioner of Economic and Community Development or the commissioner's designee and 15 members appointed jointly by both Commissioners. This bill does not seek to change the specifications of each member's spot, it only changes the appointing authority. The appointing authorities would appoint members as follows:

1. The Commissioners of Economic and Community Development and of Agriculture, Conservation, and Forestry will jointly appoint the following members:
  - a. Two members from relevant financial institutions with experience in the agricultural and forest products industries;
  - b. One manufacturer of forest products;
  - c. One manufacturer of value-added agricultural products or representative of the value-added agricultural products industry; and

- d. One member actively engaged in providing marketing assistance, market development or business and financial planning.
2. The President of the Senate shall appoint 5 members of the board as follows:
    - a. One member of a statewide industry group representing conventional nondairy farming;
    - b. One member of a statewide industry group representing the forest products industry;
    - c. One member representing the supply chain in processing, manufacturing or distribution;
    - d. One member of a statewide industry group representing dairy producers; and
    - e. One member representing historically underserved racial populations in nondairy farming.
  3. The Speaker of the House shall appoint 5 members of the board as follows:
    - a. One member of a statewide industry group representing organic nondairy farming;
    - b. One member from a statewide group representing the logging and trucking industry;
    - c. One member representing the supply chain in processing, manufacturing or distribution;
    - d. One member who is a member of a federally recognized Indian nation, tribe or band in this State; and
    - e. One member representing historically underserved racial populations in nondairy farming.

These changes would ensure that the Legislature, which ultimately supplies the Investment Fund with the resources it needs to do its critical work, has a say in the appointments to that Advisory Board.

Second, this bill adds a conflict of interest provision to the bill. This measure is simply to ensure that any member who holds a position in a producer or business that causes a conflict of interest in voting on a certain investment may not participate in those votes, ensuring the integrity of decisions made by the Board.

Third, the bill requires producers of agricultural, food and forest products receiving disbursements from the Fund to obtain their primary agricultural, food or forest products from within the State. This will ensure that those who are benefiting from the Fund are deriving the products that they use primarily from this state, as opposed to, for example, taking materials produced or obtained elsewhere and assembling them here. Since the purpose of this fund is to grow equitable, comprehensive, and locally based food systems here in Maine, I believe that it is

more than appropriate to limit the recipients of those funds to those who are already doing that critical work, right here in Maine.

Finally, put very simply, this bill asks for an appropriation of \$10,000,000 in fiscal year 2024-2025, in order to increase investment to the Fund. So far, the Fund has seen an appropriation of \$500,000, an amount which has yet to be disbursed. While this is a strong start, I believe that to make a significant, long-lasting impact, we must increase the Legislature's investment to this Fund.

This committee knows well that in order to grow strong, Maine-based food systems right here at home, we need to make sustained, targeted, and equitable investment in every step of those processes. This bill makes structural changes to ensure fairness in the work of the Advisory Board of the Investment Fund, and additionally supplies that Fund with the resources that it needs to perform its critical mission. I urge you to support this bill, and I'm happy to answer any questions you may have.