



Testimony of the Maine Organic Farmers and Gardeners Association
in support of
LD 2212 - *An Act to Strengthen Maine's Agriculture, Food System
and Forest Products Infrastructure Investment*

February 28, 2004

Good afternoon Senator Ingwersen, Representative Pluecker and members of the Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry Committee. My name is Heather Spalding and I am deputy director of the Maine Organic Farmers and Gardeners Association (MOFGA). I am speaking today in support of LD 2212 - *An Act to Strengthen Maine's Agriculture, Food System and Forest Products Infrastructure Investment*.

MOFGA is working to build 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 526 organic farms and processing operations representing more than \$120 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. 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.

We thank Speaker Talbot Ross for her leadership and dedication to creating the Maine Agriculture, Food and Forest Products Investment Fund. We know that there is a great need for increased infrastructure to support Maine farmers and we believe that allocating significant financial resources to this program will help Maine achieve its economic development goals as well as those of the climate action plan. The \$20 million Agriculture Infrastructure Investment Program was oversubscribed and we know that many more farmers could benefit from improved infrastructure.

Recent census data is sobering, indicating continued farm decline in the U.S. and a 7.4% decline in the number of farms in Maine. This reflects the disruption that farmers have experienced in recent years due to the Pandemic, escalating costs of production, labor and housing shortages, dramatically shifting weather patterns, geopolitical unrest, and increasing consolidation of agribusiness. The numbers underscore the need for further investment in Maine's food and agriculture system so that farmers are not getting squeezed at every corner, so that farming is restored to a viable and vibrant livelihood throughout our state, and so that all Maine people can have access to local, healthy foods on their tables each day.

MOFGA is preparing an updated economic impact report that includes survey data from our farmers. We asked farmers to rate the importance of various production-related goals to their farms, and the most popular "very important" responses involved purchasing or building more infrastructure; extending seasonal availability of existing products; and increasing scale of existing products. Funding the Maine Agriculture, Food and Forest Products Investment Fund will be a great help to our farmers as they work to meet the demands of Maine consumers.

Again, we are enthusiastic about this bill and grateful to Speaker Talbot Ross and all the co-sponsors for their commitment to building the necessary infrastructure for a vibrant Maine agriculture. We do



have questions about three areas of the bill language – one in the section on “Board member conflicts of interest”, and two in the section on “uses of disbursements limited”:

- Regarding the conflicts of interest language, we think it would be important to clarify what constitutes a conflict of interest. This is an important factor in ensuring fairness and transparency. We also think it should be applied to anyone who will receive a direct benefit but not necessarily preclude participation in the Board by someone whose broad sector may benefit from the Program.
- Regarding uses of disbursements, the clause “A producer that receives a disbursement from the fund must have a processing or manufacturing facility that is located in the State” suggests that farmers currently without processing or manufacturing equipment may be excluded from the Program. We suggest a slight edit in that clause such as “A producer that receives a disbursement from the fund must use it for a processing or manufacturing facility that is located in the Sate”. Also in that section, we hope that the word “primary” is the operative term in the clause “shall use the disbursement to obtain the primary agricultural, food or forest product used in its commercial products from a farm or forest....” This Program is all about increasing local production of and markets for farm and forest products and will be a vehicle for helping Maine achieve its Climate Action Plan goal of 30% of food produced and consumed in Maine by 2030. We also recognize that there may be times when valuable processing infrastructure has capacity to process beyond what is readily available within the borders of Maine. We would hope that there could be some mechanism to ensure that Maine produce is prioritized while some accommodation could be made for processing products from away.

Thank you for your consideration of this legislation. I urge the Committee to vote unanimously in support of LD 2122.

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 \$120 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.