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**TESTIMONY BEFORE THE JOINT STANDING COMMITTEE ON
AGRICULTURE, CONSERVATION AND FORESTRY**

NEITHER FOR NOR AGAINST LD 550

An Act to Support Outdoor, Agricultural-based and Hands-on Experiential Learning in Public Schools

March 13, 2025

Senator Talbot Ross, Representative Pluecker, and members of the Joint Standing Committee on Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry, my name is Craig Lapine, and I am the Director of the Bureau of Agriculture, Food, and Rural Resources. I am speaking on behalf of the Department of Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry (DACF) neither for nor against LD 550, “*An Act to Support Outdoor, Agricultural-based and Hands-on Experiential Learning in Public Schools.*”

LD 550 calls for the Department to develop and manage a grant program that, in essence, helps public schools and school administrative units fund and staff outdoor experiential programs. The objectives of the Maine Experiential Education Program (MEEP) complement DACF’s mission to support the viability of farms and food businesses and encourage careers in agriculture. We need projects—like this bill proposes—that cultivate both the awareness of where food comes from and an appreciation for the Maine people who grow it. Given our 2030 goal to have 30% of the food consumed in Maine be sourced from Maine producers, we are in favor of efforts like this that encourage the consumption of Maine-grown foods and highlight the diverse, high-quality products that can be produced here—by Maine farmers or by participants in school and community gardens. By supporting garden-based education in schools and linking that education to the Maine Farm and Sea to School Institute, a program that incentivizes the use of local foods in school meal programs, MEEP appears designed to do all these things and more.

DACF estimates that creating the grant program would require staff at the level of a Public Service Coordinator II. Funding for staff would need to be attached to legislation establishing the program for DACF to fulfill the scope of this bill. We note that the bill includes a trigger in that it would not become effective until funding is made available through Congress, the U.S. Department of Agriculture, or other public or private entities.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony today. I am happy to answer any questions now or during the work session.

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