



Testimony to the Joint Standing Committee on Agriculture, Conservation & Forestry

In Support:

LD 1252, *An Act to Amend the Laws Governing the Maine Agriculture, Food System and Forest Products Infrastructure Investment Advisory Board*

4/1/25

Dear Senator Talbot-Ross, Representative Pluecker, and Distinguished Members of the Agriculture, Conservation & Forestry Committee:

My name is Amy Winston. I am a resident of Edgecomb and testifying on behalf of CEI, in support of LD 1252. Founded in 1977, CEI is a **Community Development Financial Institution (CDFI)** based in Brunswick. Our mission is to build a just, vibrant, and climate-resilient future for people and communities in Maine and rural areas by integrating finance, business expertise, and policy solutions. We provide free, one-on-one business advising with industry experts and financing for businesses in communities that are underserved by mainstream financial institutions.

As a **mission-driven investor**, CEI works with companies in our portfolio, across all industries. Our organization has decades of experience working with natural resource-based businesses, including sustainable farm and fishery producers, processors, manufacturers and distributors. Our Tastemakers grant program, Wicked Fast microloans, traditional business loans and equity investments, are designed to meet each business's unique needs.

In **2024**, CEI invested \$22.9 million in 129 businesses (126 in Maine), including **\$8.3 million to 36 farmers, harvesters, producers, processors and distributors** (and 5 marine food producers). In the last five years (**2019-2024**), CEI has invested a total of \$141.6 million in 544 businesses, **\$28.8 million of** which went to **143 farm, food service and value-added food** manufacturing businesses in Maine. Of the 5,237 new (1,711) and existing (3,526) jobs that have been created and retained as a result of CEI financing overall, these food businesses have created **522 new and retained 1106 food economy jobs**.

CEI strongly supports LD 1252. We are thankful to Representative Hepler for bringing forward this bill, which continues the **state's initiative to establish and capitalize a long-term funding mechanism to support Maine's iconic heritage industries**. CEI has been involved in this effort since its inception in the 129th. We are extremely **grateful to Senator Talbot-Ross for her steadfast leadership** in creating the Maine Ag, Food and Forest Products Investment Fund (MAFFPIF) with consistent support from this committee and bipartisan, bicameral support in both chambers.

Modeled on successful programs in Vermont and Massachusetts, the MAFFPIF exists to ensure equitable access to needed capital that does not currently exist in Maine. It is a **landmark policy** that is designed to promote interagency coordination in state government and synergistic economic development. This fund will enable our state to scale existing efforts to propel innovation, growth and job creation on farms and in early-stage food processing and manufacturing businesses. It will enable capital providers to leverage existing financing to make more meaningful infrastructure investments, bridging gaps and alleviating supply chain bottlenecks to facilitate the production, storage, processing, distribution, marketing and consumption of Maine-produced foods.



All of Maine benefits from successful businesses in agriculture, food systems and forest products. They keep landscapes productive and drive economic activity in rural communities, employing local people and sourcing from Maine growers and producers, multiplying every investment.

MAFFPIF **aligns with and advances existing state policy** objectives, including: Maine's economic development strategy (The 2024 Reset), Ending Hunger by 2030, and the newly updated Maine Won't Wait climate action plan. These policies center Maine food and forest products business growth and innovation and call for Maine to find ways to expand technical assistance to natural resource industries and increase the amount of Maine produced food that is purchased and consumed in Maine, from schools and institutions to retail grocery chains. MAFFPIF provides a concrete financing tool to help support the above stated initiatives and other efforts by organizations such as FocusMaine goal to grow quality food and agriculture jobs in Maine, Maine Farm and Sea to School Network and the Local Switchboard to support institutional purchasing, and the statewide objectives in New England Feeding New England's Cultivating a Reliant Food Supply project.

As written, LD 1252 contains the committee amendments that were incorporated into the appropriations bill that passed last session but was not acted on by the House or signed into law when the legislature adjourned. That bill, LD 2212, also contained an appropriation to build the Fund, which is now nearly ready to begin making investments in the state's food and forest products businesses. These provisions tighten the fund's accountability and assurance that businesses that are supported by the Fund are making critical infrastructure investments that will benefit additional businesses up- and downstream, making more Maine food more available to more Maine people and assisting producers to access additional markets beyond Maine. These are positive additions that can be achieved in statute or through departmental rulemaking and the recommendations of the advisory board which is now meeting to structure the fund most impactfully. Currently, what is really needed is an influx of capital to equip this fund. We respectfully suggest that **an appropriation recommended by this committee would send a clear signal to your legislative colleagues on the appropriations committee that this is a priority** for the state's agricultural, conservation and forestry economies.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony in support of LD 1252. We urge you to support this bill with **an appropriation that will enable the Fund to begin making investments** in Maine farms, food and forest products businesses.