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Testimony of Rep. Allison Hepler presenting

LD 1252, An Act to Amend the Laws Governing the Maine Agriculture, Food System and Forest Products Infrastructure Investment Advisory Board
Before the Joint Standing Committee on Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry

Good afternoon, Senator Talbot Ross, Representative Pluecker and colleagues of the Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry Committee. As you know, I am Allison Hepler, and I represent the towns of Arrowsic, Georgetown, Phippsburg, West Bath and Woolwich. I am pleased to present **LD 1252, An Act to Amend the Laws Governing the Maine Agriculture, Food System and Forest Products Infrastructure Investment Advisory Board.**

This bill represents an additional step on the way to continue Maine's investment in the state's agricultural, food, and forest products processing and manufacturing industries. As a member of two of the legislature's natural resources committees, ones that especially focus on our heritage industries, I know all too well how important it is for the state to find ways to sustain our farmers and foresters.

Because the Maine Agriculture, Food and Forest Products Investment Fund predates my time on this committee, I did a little digging to look into its origins, which date back to 2020. The goal was to find ways to provide grants for farmers and food processors to improve critical infrastructure.

The pandemic, although it initially delayed the formation of this Fund, initially created the Agricultural Infrastructure Investment Program (AIIP) which provided an initial source of funding with federal emergency funding due to COVID-19. In 2022, \$20 million provided funding to 64 agricultural businesses in every county in Maine. Examples included: capital improvements for existing and new buildings; packaging and handling equipment; upgrades to utilities; growing, processing, and manufacturing equipment and construction; technology to support increased capacity; and technical assistance including market research. The AIIP served as a prototype for the Investment Fund we have now.

In 2023, this committee unanimously supported this Fund and additional funding, as well as staff support. The original \$20 million fiscal note was reduced to \$500,000 in the Appropriations Committee and then passed in the 131st.

The bill before you, LD 1252, makes a minor but important change in the criteria for disbursements from the Fund, ensuring that funds are limited to facilities and uses within the state. The bill also establishes criteria for conflicts of interest on the Advisory Board.

In speaking to colleagues in the legislature, in this committee, among industry members, and within the Department, it's clear that the Maine Agriculture, Food System and Forest Products Infrastructure Investment Fund continues to garner wide support.

Making a living with our natural resources is not for the faint of heart but I am grateful that Maine people do this every day. Thank you for your time and I hope to be able to answer any questions you have. I imagine that the Department and Coastal Enterprises, Inc., are better positioned to answer questions.