



**Testimony of Shelley Megquier, Policy & Research Director, Maine Farmland Trust, to the 132nd
Legislature's Joint Standing Committee on Appropriations and Financial Affairs
April 10, 2025**

Good afternoon Senator Rotundo, Representative Gattine, and members of the Joint Standing Committee on Appropriations and Financial Affairs. My name is Shelley Megquier and I am the Policy & Research Director at Maine Farmland Trust (MFT). I am providing testimony on behalf of MFT in support of LD 362 – *An Act to Authorize a General Fund Bond Issue to Replenish the Land for Maine's Future Program*.

MFT is a member-powered statewide organization that works to protect farmland, support farmers, and advance the future of farming. Our goals are to keep agricultural lands working and help farmers and their communities thrive. Since our founding in 1999, MFT has helped to permanently protect farmland in every county in Maine, amounting to nearly 57,000 acres across 345 farms. Our Farm Network includes more than 550 farms that have participated in MFT's programming either through an agricultural easement or through one of our programs. Our main program areas are Farmland Protection, Farmland Access, Stewardship, Farm Business Planning, PFAS Support, Climate Resilience, and Policy and Research.

Protecting farmland is critical for ensuring we have the land base needed to grow our agricultural economy and strengthen food security for our communities, state, and region. But, farmland in Maine is at risk. The 2022 Census of Agriculture showed that between 2017 and 2022, more than 82,000 acres of farmland in Maine fell out of agricultural production.¹ Farmland in Maine is being lost to agriculture due to increasing development pressures, a growing interest in farmland from non-farming buyers, dramatic increases in the cost of land, and farm viability challenges that are making it harder for farmers to afford to keep their land in agriculture. At the same time, less than 5 percent of Maine's farmland is currently protected – this is the lowest amount of any state in New England. Protecting farmland through a conservation easement keeps land available for agricultural use and creates more affordable access to farmland for both new and established farmers. Agricultural conservation is critical to ensure that we have the land base needed to sustain our heritage industries, grow our agricultural economy, strengthen food security, and build resilience to climate change for our state and communities.

I have attached a *Farmland Protection in Maine* briefing note to my testimony that shares more data on the status of farmland protection in Maine and suggests key actions that need to be taken, one of which is ongoing funding for the Land for Maine's Future (LMF) Program.

LD 362 proposes the authorization of a general fund bond to provide \$50 million for the LMF program. LMF is Maine's primary public funding vehicle to protect water access, outdoor recreation, working lands and waterfronts, and fish and wildlife habitat. Since its creation in 1987, LMF has protected over 600,000 acres, including nearly 10,000 acres of farmland and 42 farms.² This funding proposed by LD 362 would serve as an important source of support for LMF.

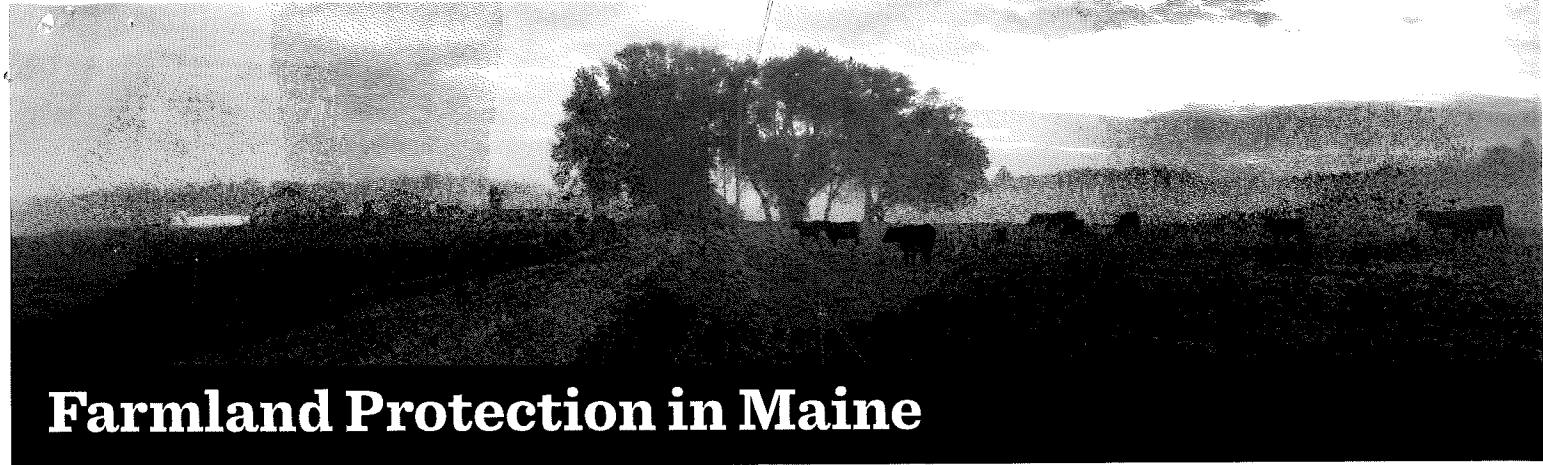
¹ USDA NASS, *Census of Agriculture for 2022, Maine*, "Land: 2022 and 2017."

² Land for Maine's future project data, found at <https://www.maine.gov/dacf/lmf/projects.shtml#all>

This bill will also help to advance the goals of the state’s updated 2024 climate action plan *Maine Won’t Wait*, which establishes new targets specific to farmland protection – calling for Maine to secure and commit ongoing, dedicated funding for farmland conservation to double the amount of permanently protected farmland in the state by 2030 and ensure no net loss of farmland in Maine.³ In order to realize this goal, we need to meet the rapid growth in development pressure across the state with an equally rapid expansion of our farmland protection efforts, especially publicly funded farmland protection. Funding for LMF through supporting LD 362 is one step in that direction.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony in support of LD 362. I’m happy to answer any questions you may have.

³ Maine Climate Council, *Maine Won’t Wait: A Four-Year Plan for Climate Action*, p. 109, (2024), available at: <https://www.maine.gov/climateplan/the-plan>.



Farmland Protection in Maine

Farmland is the foundation for thriving farm businesses, communities, and rural economies. But, farmland in Maine is at risk of being lost to agriculture due to increasing development pressures, a growing interest in farmland from non-farming buyers, dramatic increases in the cost of land, and farm viability challenges that are making it harder for farmers to afford to keep their land in agriculture.

Protecting farmland through a conservation easement keeps land available for agricultural use and creates more affordable access to farmland for both new and established farmers. Conservation is critical to ensure that we have the land base needed to grow our agricultural economy, strengthen food security, and build resilience to climate change for our state and communities.

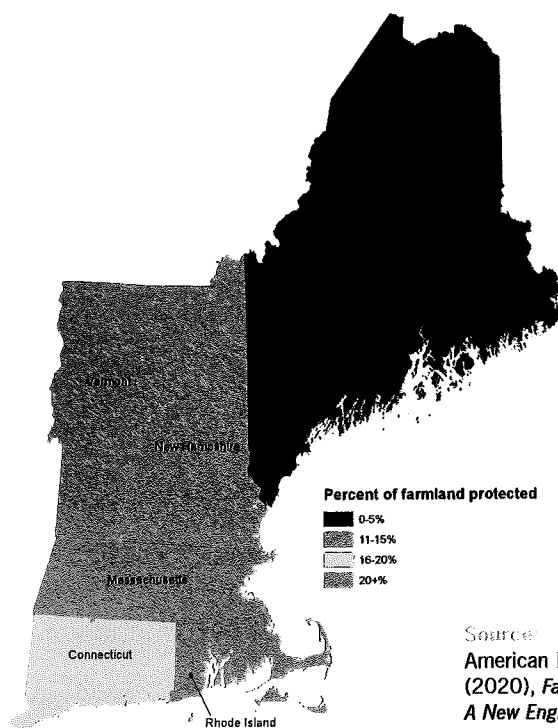
The Status of Farmland Protection in Maine

Maine lags far behind many other states in the Northeast in the number of farms protected by conservation easements, the acres of farmland protected, and the percentage of the state's existing farmland that is under conservation. **Less than 5 percent of Maine's farmland is currently protected** – this is the lowest amount of any state in New England.

What is an agricultural conservation easement?

An agricultural easement is a form of conservation easement – a voluntary legal agreement that permanently protects land by restricting it for open space, recreation, wildlife habitat, or agricultural production. An agricultural easement is written with farm use as the top priority. Such an easement keeps the land in private ownership and available for agriculture by permanently altering the property deed to prevent or minimize subdivision, and to permit construction for mainly agricultural buildings and residential buildings that support the farm. Protecting Maine's farmland in this way guarantees that it will be available for current and future agricultural use.

Farmland Protection Progress in New England



Source:
American Farmland Trust
(2020), *Farms Under Threat:
A New England Perspective*

Why Does Maine Lag Behind?

Maine lags behind due to a lack of public investment in farmland protection. In Maine, the vast majority of our protected working farmland has been accomplished by Maine Farmland Trust and other land trusts and conservation organizations through the support of private funding. Although the Land for Maine's Future (LMF) Program, Maine's primary public funding vehicle for land conservation, and the recently formed Working Farmland Access and Protection Program, administered by the state's Bureau of Agriculture, Food and Rural Resources, form important pieces of the puzzle, the amount of state funding that has been dedicated to farmland protection efforts in Maine is significantly less than in other Northeastern states.

Most other states in the region have robust, publicly funded state programs dedicated to the protection of farms and agricultural land.

Sources:
 *American Farmland Trust (2024),
 Status of State PACE Programs
 **Estimate based on Maine
 Farmland Trust spending analysis

Farmland Protection Funding*			
State	Total Funding	State Funding	Other Funding
Massachusetts	\$328,333,316	\$249,189,465	\$79,143,851
Vermont	\$231,122,176	\$95,532,538	\$135,589,638
Connecticut	\$191,997,482	\$138,554,256	\$53,443,226
Rhode Island	\$123,193,645	\$39,523,630	\$83,670,015
New Hampshire	\$61,775,802	\$22,497,708	\$39,278,094
Maine	\$53,706,622	\$12,706,622	\$41,000,000**



Accelerating the Pace of Farmland Conservation

We need to rapidly expand our farmland protection efforts in the state, particularly publicly funded farmland protection in order to stave off increasing development pressures and ensure that farmers can continue to access the land they need for agricultural production.

In order to meet the challenge, we need dedicated public funding for farmland protection, and we need to ensure that we have the program structures and capacity in place for efficient use of this funding.



Alignment with State Goals

Farmland protection is climate action.

The state's 2024 update to the *Maine Won't Wait* climate action plan establishes new targets specific to farmland protection – calling for Maine **to secure and commit to ongoing, dedicated funding for farmland conservation to double the amount of permanently protected farmland in the state by 2030 and ensure no net loss of farmland in Maine.** The updated plan also reaffirms the goals established in the 2020 plan to increase the amount of Maine-produced food consumed in the state and the amount of land conserved statewide to 30% by 2030, and identifies updated strategies for reaching those important goals.

Farmland protection supports economic development.

Farming is the lifeblood of our rural economies and plays a key role in supporting Maine's broader food sector, which is identified in the state's 10-year economic development plan as one of the four areas most ripe for economic development.² Productive farmland – and affordable access to this land – is the foundation for thriving local farm and food businesses.

Farmland protection is key to food security.

Maine's Roadmap to End Hunger by 2030 proposes farmland protection as an important strategy to investing in and strengthening Maine's food infrastructure.³ Agricultural and food production of all scales, in all parts of the state, by all communities who wish to engage in them, are important to our food security.

Sources:

¹Maine Climate Council, *Maine Won't Wait: A Four-Year Plan for Climate Action*, p. 109 and p. 116 (2024), available at: www.maine.gov/climateplan/

²Maine Department of Economic and Community Development, *Maine Economic Development Strategy (2020-2029): A Focus on Talent and Innovation*, p. 14 (2019), available at: www.maine.gov/decd/strategic-plan

³*Everyone at the Table: Maine's Roadmap to End Hunger by 2030*, Commissioned by Maine Department of Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry, p. 32 (2022), available at: www.maine.gov/dacf/about/commissioners/endlunger/index.shtml#roadmap

What Can You Do to Support Farmland Protection?

Maine's elected officials should support conservation, farm viability efforts, and dedicated funding for farmland conservation. Join this effort by:

- ▶ **Supporting legislation to strengthen and allocate dedicated funding for the state's Working Farmland Access and Protection Program**
- ▶ **Securing ongoing funding for the Land For Maine's Future Program**
- ▶ **Shoring up Maine's farms through supporting an agricultural bond that promotes farm viability and helps keep farmland in active agriculture**

Together, we can accelerate the pace of Maine's farmland protection work in order to keep our working lands available for agriculture and to secure more affordable access to farmland for Maine's farmers now and in the future.

