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Good afternoon, my name is Lilly Gardiner, and I represent the School-Based Food Hub serving the school districts of Lewiston, Lisbon, and Auburn. Our goal is to bring more locally grown food into school meals, creating a sustainable system that supports both our students and local farmers.

We have a four-year grant through Full Plates to purchase equipment for processing and distributing local farm products between the three districts. Our work has focused on increasing farm-to-school purchases, sharing staff for summer processing, and finding efficient methods to process food in our kitchens and increase scratch cooking. We're also creating a toolkit to help other districts replicate our model.

However, with the proposed cuts and changes to federal programs like CEP we are deeply concerned about the future of our efforts. Our momentum was rising at the start of this school year! For example in the Auburn School District in a Month by Month comparison, there were some months showing an 35% increase in local procurement from the following year, with 25 local farmers being featured on their school menu . The loss of Local Farm for Schools was the first massive hit to our progress. Without funding, we have less resources to continue this work, and with the increased administrative burden from these policy changes, we risk losing valuable time that we need to focus on improving school meals and supporting our farmers.

The stakes are high. If these changes go through, our momentum will stall, and we won't be able to continue creating the kind of food system that benefits Maine's children, farmers, and communities. We urge the committee to support this bill, ensuring that Maine schools continue to have access to the resources they need to support local food sourcing, streamline operations, and create lasting partnerships with Maine's farmers.

Thank you for your time.

Lilly Gardiner  
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Project Coordinator