



**Testimony of Shelley Megquier, Policy & Research Director, Maine Farmland Trust, to the 132nd
Legislature's Joint Standing Committee on Agriculture, Conservation, and Forestry
April 17, 2025**

Good afternoon Senator Talbot Ross, Representative Pluecker, and members of the Joint Standing Committee on Agriculture, Conservation, and Forestry. 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 1528—*An Act to Support Farmland Conservation*.

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 through an agricultural conservation easement – the best estimate we have is ~3.5% and 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 also helps to build resilience to climate change for our state and communities. In fact, the state's updated 2024 climate action plan Maine Won't Wait 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. 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.

The Department of Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry (DACF) Bureau of Agriculture, Food and Rural Resources' Working Farmland Access and Protection Program (WFAPP) is a perfect vehicle for dedicated funding to farmland conservation, as it is designed to protect Maine's most productive and economically significant farmland. This language in this bill reiterates language that was put forth in the Governor's biennial budget to ensure that WFAPP can receive dedicated funding.

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

- *7 MRSA §164, sub-§5 is enacted to read: Funding. A separate nonlapsing, interest-bearing account, administered by the department within the Bureau of Agriculture, Food and Rural Resources, is established in the department to support public-private partnerships to carry out the purposes of the program. The account consists of money appropriated or allocated to it by the Legislature or received from any private or public source.*

A separate account would offer the Department an additional tool to support farmland conservation, essentially adding flexibility within the Program for smoother and more robust implementation. This language and approach and the dedicated funding of \$1 million proposed through LD 1528 aligns with the recommendations coming out of the Maine Climate Council's Natural and Working Lands Work Group for there to be a well-funded, sufficiently staffed, stand-alone state program or mechanism for farmland conservation *in addition to the Land for Maine's future program.*

The bill also seeks funding for a staff person dedicated to running the Program. MFT knows from firsthand experience that agricultural easements take time and expertise to put into place. It takes significant time and energy to close a project and farmers deserve responsive staff, quick turnarounds, and tailored easement terms whenever possible – all things that can be better accomplished with an additional skilled staff person within the Program.

To close, we support LD 1528's effort to add staffing capacity, dedicated funding, and greater flexibility in administration of the Working Farmland Access and Protection Program. This bill will lay important groundwork to enable the State to accelerate progress on farmland conservation.

Thank you very much. Please reach out if you have any questions or follow-ups.