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TESTIMONY BEFORE THE JOINT STANDING COMMITTEE ON AGRICULTURE,
CONSERVATION AND FORESTRY

IN SUPPORT OF LD 1528

An Act to Support Farmland Conservation

April 17, 2025

Senator Talbot Ross, Representative Pluecker, and members of the Joint Standing Committee on Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry, my name is Craig Lapine, and I am the Director of the Bureau of Agriculture, Food and Rural Resources (BAFRR) within the Maine Department of Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry (DACF). I am speaking in favor of LD 1528, *An Act to Support Farmland Conservation*.

LD 1528 aims to enhance and strengthen the Working Farmland Access and Protection Program (WFAPP), which resides in BAFRR, to better support farmland conservation in Maine. It does this primarily by creating a dedicated Resource Management Coordinator within the Bureau, by effecting an administrative change by establishing a WFAPP account within the Bureau—a change that opens the door for new flexibility and creativity in how we approach farmland protection, and by capitalizing that account with a one-time, non-lapsing allocation of \$1 million. While the WFAPP account language was included in the Governor's budget proposal, the funding allocation and staff position was not. Should the proposed position and allocation in this bill not be funded at this time, creation of the WFAPP account within BAFRR is still important to the Department, as we anticipate opportunities to pursue other sources of funding that could seed this account and serve to accelerate farmland conservation in Maine.

The benefits of farms and farmland to our state and its people are numerous, from providing local and regional food security to economic, cultural, environmental, and educational benefits, aesthetic values, and critical wildlife habitat. The Maine Climate Action Plan, *Maine Won't Wait* (MWW), recommends that 30% of our natural and working lands in Maine be conserved by 2030 and that Maine-produced food consumption be increased to 30% by 2030. While we currently count 22% of such lands as conserved, most of the land in that figure is working forestland and recreational lands. Approximately 3.6% of our farmland is protected at this time, which lags far behind most other states in the Northeast. MWW also points out that there has

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been a relatively small amount of public investment in farmland protection in comparison to other types of conservation, and that we should establish a new state program that identifies ongoing, dedicated funding for farmland conservation.

Permanently securing farmland is critical to ensuring that Maine meets these goals. This bill can help modulate future farmland loss by enabling flexibility in farmland conservation programs. It enhances the WFAPP Program by allowing it to be more creatively, rapidly, and broadly deployed throughout the state.

The bill, as written, would not change WFAPP's current role in advising the Commissioner on farmland protection projects to be funded by the Land for Maine's Future (LMF) board. It does, however, include one full-time staff person to help support the broader purpose and impact of the WFAPP program. In addition, it would create a tool that complements the important work of the LMF program, which protects farmland that aligns with LMF's criteria. We know that there are many other farms in our state that also could be conserved if this fund were to be established, and a more rapid process could be utilized for farms that may not have the ability or time to work through the LMF or USDA's Agricultural Conservation Easement Program (ACEP) processes. Furthermore, with dedicated staff, DACF could expedite following the lead of the Connecticut Department of Agriculture and pursue designation by USDA as a "certified entity," which has helped them to accelerate the use of federal ACEP funds to support farmland protection projects in their state.

Increased capacity for this program was also identified as a priority within the LMF Government Evaluation Act report, as the function BAFRR serves as a designated agency is critical to the success of LMF farmland conservation projects. The proposed position would expand DACF's capacity to prevent the loss of farmland in the state. Currently, the Bureau's Farm Viability and Farmland Protection Specialist can dedicate only about 15% of her time to protection projects because of all the grantmaking, technical assistance, and other critical farm viability tasks that fall to that position, including overseeing the Maine Farms for the Future program, which has maintained a strong interest among farmers year after year. With dedicated staffing, we will be able to pursue additional sources of funding to broaden our ability to achieve the goals of WFAPP and our state's climate action plan better.

I am happy to answer any questions you may have now or at the work session.