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THE MAINE SENATE  
132nd Legislature

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**Joint Standing Committee on Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry  
on LD 1528, An Act to Support Farmland Conservation  
April 17, 2025**

Senator Talbot Ross, Representative Pluecker, and esteemed members of the Joint Standing Committee on Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry: I am Senator Rick Bennett of Oxford, and I have the honor of serving 14 communities in Western Maine in the State Senate. I am proud to sponsor LD 1528, "An Act to Support Farmland Conservation."

Maine's farmland is the bedrock of our rural economy, our food system, and our cultural heritage. If we are serious about supporting agriculture in this state—and I believe we are—we must be equally serious about protecting the very land that makes it all possible.

The 2022 Census of Agriculture makes clear what many of us have seen happening on the ground: between 2017 and 2022, Maine lost more than 82,000 acres of farmland. That's an alarming trend, driven by increasing development pressure, non-farming land buyers, and land prices that are out of reach for too many farmers.

Today, less than 5% of Maine's farmland is permanently protected—making us last in New England on this front. That is simply unacceptable if we're aiming to build a resilient and thriving agricultural economy. Conservation easements are one proven tool. They not only preserve farmland for future generations, but they can also make it more affordable for young and beginning farmers to gain access to land.

LD 1528 is a smart, targeted measure that directly supports the goals outlined in our updated *Maine Won't Wait* climate action plan. That plan calls for doubling protected farmland by 2030 and ensuring no net loss. To achieve that, we must act decisively—and this bill helps us do just that.

Specifically, LD 1528 would:

- Create a dedicated account within the Department of Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry to expand publicly funded farmland protection;
- Establish a Resource Management Coordinator position to build much-needed capacity; and
- Provide a \$1 million appropriation to increase direct investment in farmland protection.

These investments will significantly strengthen the Working Farmland Access and Protection Program (WFAPP), which was established in 2021 to conserve farmland of strategic importance to Maine's agricultural future. But right now, the program is under-resourced and not fully functioning as intended.

We have a chance here to fix that.

WFAPP is designed to be a nimble, farmer-focused tool that complements existing programs like Land for Maine's Future (LMF). While LMF has done great work, WFAPP can act more swiftly in cases where time is of the essence—particularly during moments of transition and succession, when families are vulnerable and farms are most at risk of being lost to development. With private farmland owners, speed and flexibility matter.

To put it plainly: we need a funded, streamlined tool to meet the moment. WFAPP is that tool—if we give it the support it needs.

This bill also aligns with the Governor's proposed budget and reflects the bipartisan understanding that preserving farmland is not just about open space—it's about economic development, environmental resilience, and long-term food security.

Colleagues, I believe that if we fail to protect our farmland now, we will regret it later. LD 1528 gives us the practical tools to take action today. I respectfully urge your support.

Thank you for your time and thoughtful consideration. I'd be happy to answer any questions.