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

IN SUPPORT OF LD 1450

An Act Regarding the Voluntary Municipal Farm Support Program

May 6, 2025

Senator Talbot Ross, Representative Pluecker, and members of the Joint Standing Committee on Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry, my name is Dr. Mariam Taleb. I am the Farm Viability and Farmland Protection Specialist within the Bureau of Agriculture, Food, and Rural Resources. I am testifying on behalf of the Department of Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry (DACF) in support of LD 1450, *An Act Regarding the Voluntary Municipal Farm Support Program*.

Farm businesses face growing financial stressors, with many of Maine's farms operating on minimal profit margins. Because of this, even small reductions to farm operating expenses can mean the difference between business success and failure. For that reason, tax relief has been a key tool in protecting farms in Maine and across the country.

The Voluntary Municipal Farm Support Program (VMFSP) is an underutilized program that, fully leveraged, can help accomplish two goals simultaneously: protecting more of Maine's farmland while supporting farm viability. The VMFSP was established in the 123rd legislature to allow towns to create their own local, non-permanent agricultural conservation easement programs in exchange for full or partial reimbursement of the participating farmer's property taxes on farmland and farm buildings. LD 1450 is an effort to update and improve the existing program.

The VMFSP is not underutilized due to a lack of interest. Towns and partner organizations regularly contact staff in the Department's Bureau of Agriculture, Food and Rural Resources for assistance in developing farm-friendly town policies. Bureau staff have observed that the barriers to the VMFSP are a lack of awareness by farmers, concern about the administrative burden of reviewing and approving farm support arrangements, and uncertainty about whether farm businesses would participate due to certain existing requirements.

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Moving this program to Title 36 will improve its visibility amongst town councils, which are already seeking ideas to support farm businesses better. While DACF does support towns participating in the program, VMFSP is predominantly informed by data held by the Maine Revenue Service.

Further, allowing municipal bodies flexibility in establishing an approval process will reduce the technical and administrative burden on local officials.

For farms that may otherwise be interested in participating in this program, a twenty-year protection agreement requires Maine farmers to commit to an agreement longer than most farm businesses can reasonably project. DACF believes that reducing the protection requirement from twenty years to ten will increase farmer participation in the program. Ultimately, if a longer protection period comes at the cost of participation, those additional ten years confer no benefit to the state's goals.

Finally, the rulemaking authority for this program currently is Major Substantive. Given the nature of this program and the necessity of municipal involvement, DACF suggests that the committee change the rules to routine technical.

DACF supports LD 1450's impactful amendments to the existing Voluntary Municipal Farm Support Program. It is our hope that this will allow more municipalities to take advantage of the opportunities it presents to protect farm viability and Maine's farmland.

Thank you for your time and consideration. I am happy to answer questions now and at the work session.