



STATE OF MAINE
DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE, CONSERVATION & FORESTRY
OFFICE OF THE COMMISSIONER
22 STATE HOUSE STATION
AUGUSTA, MAINE 04333

JANET T. MILLS
GOVERNOR

AMANDA E. BEAL
COMMISSIONER

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

IN SUPPORT OF LD 1925

An Act to Improve Access to Grant Funding for the Maine Farms for the Future Program

May 13, 2025

Senator Talbot Ross, Representative Pluecker, and members of the Joint Standing Committee on Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry, my name is Craig Lapine. I direct 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 1925, *An Act to Improve Access to Grant Funding for the Maine Farms for the Future Program*, and to suggest minor technical amendments.

The Maine Farms for the Future Program is a vital resource for our state's agricultural community. This program provides essential support to farmers through business planning assistance and investment support, helping them adapt and remain viable in an increasingly challenging agricultural landscape.

Since its inception, the Maine Farms for the Future program has made awards to 291 farms through the Phase 1 Business Planning Program and 139 farms through the Phase 2 Investment Support Program. In addition, the program has protected more than 30,000 acres of farmland through 7-year term easements in exchange for dispersed Phase 2 grant funds.

This program serves many purposes to support viability throughout the lifespan of a farm business. Maturing farm businesses have used these funds to plan sustainable growth. Other farm businesses facing personal (such as injury or family changes), market (such as changing consumer preferences), or environmental challenges (such as drought or flood) use the program to identify ways to pivot, diversify, or otherwise build resilience. Increasingly, others use the awards to establish and implement transition or succession plans that help to ensure ongoing stewardship of farmland by farm businesses. LD 1925 makes common-sense amendments to the program that will modernize it and build on its strengths.

HARLOW BUILDING
18 ELKINS LANE
AUGUSTA, MAINE



PHONE: (207) 287-3200
FAX: (207) 287-2400
WEB: WWW.MAINE.GOV/DACF

There are many instances in which a farm business may not technically meet the eligibility criteria of “producing agricultural products commercially...for at least 2 years,” but is otherwise an excellent fit for the program. For example, an experienced farmer may start a new business entity when purchasing land and moving from leased land within Maine. Allowing the Department some discretion in granting exceptions will allow the program to account for the diversity of paths to a strong, viable farm business in Maine.

Although the intent of the cash grants offered in Phase 2 is to protect farmland, farm businesses that have made the choice to permanently protect their farmland are ineligible for the cash grant, effectively disincentivizing farmland conservation easements. This bill will allow farm businesses that have already protected their farmland to fully utilize this program. In addition, allowing the Department to grant exceptions permitting long-term leaseholders to access the cash grant portion of the Phase 2 program will improve its accessibility for low-resource and beginning farmers who are less likely to own the land they farm.

Finally, to my knowledge, the value of the grants and the loans available through this program has not been changed since the program was first established. That means the real dollar value of the program has decreased over time, diminishing the effect this program can have on farm businesses. This bill would adjust the maximum grant and loan awards to better reflect the needs of today’s farms and the original intended effect of this program.

There are technical adjustments that the Department would recommend as amendments to further improve this program:

- Title 7 MRSA §318, sub-§3 outlines the services that Phase 1 recipients must access with their Phase 1 funding. As it stands, in addition to requiring that recipients work one-on-one with a service provider to develop a business plan, the statute requires that they also enroll in “instruction or classroom training”. In the past, the program has coordinated with partners to offer a course to incoming cohorts, but it has not done so in recent years. Accessing alternative courses that are appropriate, relevant, and timely has not been possible in practice. We recommend that sub-§3, ¶B be amended such that instruction is an optional part of the services package.
- We are aware that the loan maximum for the Agricultural Marketing Loan Fund (AMLF), which Farms for the Future uses to provide Phase 2 loans, is also under consideration. To maintain consistency across related programs and avoid complications in administration, we recommend that the maximum loan amount align in these two programs.

DACF strongly urges the committee to vote "Ought to Pass" on LD 1925. This legislation will strengthen Maine's agricultural sector and support the next generation of farmers in our state.

Thank you for your consideration. We will have Farms for the Future staff at the work session, and I would be happy to try to answer any questions you have now.