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May 13, 2025

Testimony of Representative Laurie Osher presenting
**LD 1925, An Act to Improve Access to Grant Funding for
the Maine Farms for the Future Program**
*Before the Joint Standing Committee on Agriculture, Conservation and
Forestry*

Senator Talbot Ross, Representative Pluecker and esteemed members of the Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry Committee, I am Laurie Osher. I have the privilege of representing House District 25, most of Orono. Thank you for the opportunity to return to my old committee to present **LD 1925, An Act to Improve Access to Grant Funding for the Maine Farms for the Future Program**.

As members of the committee know, Maine Farms for the Future is a competitive grant funding program that provides business planning assistance and investment support. The program includes two phases. During the first phase, selected farms are awarded \$6,000 to work with a business advisor or another service provider to develop a business plan or research potential changes to increase "farm vitality." During the second phase, selected farms can apply for low-interest loans and, in some instances, up to \$25,000 in grant funding to invest in infrastructure or equipment related to the planning they did during Phase 1.

LD 1925 would amend the eligibility criteria for the Maine Farms for the Future Program in order to better reflect the realities of farming in Maine. It would do so in three ways:

1. By ensuring that farmers who lease (rather than own) the land they farm are eligible for the program;
2. By clarifying that farms on land already protected by an agricultural conservation agreement do not need to enter into an additional farmland protection agreement; and,
3. By empowering the Department of Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry to grant exceptions to eligibility criteria, allowing for more flexibility in supporting our farms.

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According to the 2022 Census of Agriculture, 20% of Maine farmers lease some or all of the land they are farming. Beginning farmers and farmers from marginalized groups are more likely to lease rather than own the land they farm.

Despite these realities, the program requires that farmers own the farmland - or, for some portions of the program, at least five acres of the farmland - that their farm business is using. That means as many as one in five of Maine's farmers, often those who are already facing significant barriers because they are just starting out or are disadvantaged in some other way, can't access the critical support and funding offered by Maine Farms for the Future.

Additionally, under the current criteria, farms that are already protected by an agricultural conservation easement are not eligible for Phase 2 cash grants. LD 1925 makes a commonsense update to the criteria so that those farms who have already made a commitment to conserving the land can also access the Phase 2 grant funding.

LD 1925 also increases the allowable grant and loan amounts under the program to better reflect the costs of the upfront investments needed to build a financially sustainable farm business in today's environment.

Thank you for your consideration. I would be happy to answer any questions you may have for me.