

Molly DellaRoman
Brooklin, Maine
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Dear Members of the Appropriations and Financial Affairs Committee,

My name is Molly DellaRoman and I thank you for the opportunity to speak on the behalf of LD 2094 today.

Together with my partner, Tim Skillin, we own and operate 5 Star Nursery and Orchard in Brooklin, ME; a 3 acre diversified MOFGA-certified heirloom orchard and native plant nursery. We took over the orchard that has been in existence since the 1980's in 2017. Since then, we have seen extreme weather events the likes the previous owners had never experienced. The existing infrastructure here simply cannot handle the growing threats from climate change. As you have probably heard from most farmers, there is either too much water or not enough to consistently raise a good crop from year to year. This year, the extreme drought made farming particularly hard, mentally stressful and pushed a lot of us to the brink. A lot of us feel like throwing in the towel; but we can't. We know how very important it is that smart, innovative, hard-working folks keep pushing through these climate challenges to keep our communities fed. But we need help.

Maine can play an incredibly important role in feeding itself by treating agriculture as an essential piece of infrastructure. Funding for existing and established capital and technical assistance programs such as the Ag, Food and Forest Products Investment Fund, the Farmers Drought Relief Program, the Healthy Soils Program, and the Farmland Access and Protection Program is paramount right now to keeping farms viable, therefore raising up our struggling rural economies, keeping land in agriculture to slow down the loss of these irreplaceable soils, and creating a local food supply chain that can withstand economic and climate change related turmoil.

This past season we had the opportunity to receive technical assistance from the ME Healthy Soils program. With extensive soil tests results in hand and assistance in creating a holistic approach to rebuilding our soil from extreme winter rain events, it is setting us in motion to keep going and to hopefully have systems in place for the next extreme weather events. Having a program like the Farmers Drought Relief Grant Program available is of the utmost importance at this point. Our current irrigation system is only capable for providing water for trees under the age of 4 or 5, and it couldn't even keep up with that demand this year, setting us behind 1-2 years in harvesting nursery trees. The back-to-the-landers in the 70's and 80's would never have imagined needing irrigation for cold-hardy, standard-sized apple trees with their superior deep roots. Yet here we are, at risk of losing this 40 year old orchard with an extensive library of old heirloom varieties.

Producing value-added products is also critical to farms as a way to recoup losses from less than first-grade quality produce due to increasing pressure from disease and pests and to stay viable year round. Two years ago, we spent a significant amount of our own capital in bringing our

cider house up to the state's current food safety regulations and also to provide housing for staff. We know that more upgrades are needed to increase our ability to keep diversifying and to keep contributing to local supply chain development. The attendance at our woefully inept farm stand has increased every year since the Covid pandemic. To have an investment fund such as the Ag Food and Forest Products Fund to turn to after we have invested so much of our own capital could be make or break for us going forward. The demand from the customers is here, the market system for farmers to distribute their products in Maine is solid – now to invest in helping the farmers meet that demand.

Thank you for your time today and I urge the committee to vote ought to pass.