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Testimony in Support of

LD 2094 *An Act to Authorize a General Fund Bond Issue to Support Maine's Agricultural and Forestry Sectors.*

Senator Rotundo, Representative Gattine, and fellow members of the Joint Standing Committee on Appropriations and Financial Affairs:

My name is Mark Cooper, I represent part of Windham, District 107 and I serve on the Joint Standing Committee of Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry. Just as importantly, I'm a Maine farmer. I rise today in support of LD 2094 because it represents exactly the kind of targeted investment our agricultural sector needs—without creating more government overhead. As someone who serves on the ACF Committee, I've heard directly from producers across our state. And as a farmer myself, I'm living this reality every single day.

Here's what we're up against:

- Rising input costs are squeezing our margins while market prices fail to keep pace. Many family farms are barely breaking even.
- Many farms are having to branch out into other products, side business and processing just to stay in business. It is not uncommon now for a 4th or 5th generation apple farm to add several side businesses to remain in business growing apples. Or a 4th generation dairy farm adding vegetables and a home bakery just to supplement farm income to keep milking cows.
- Having sufficient capital on hand for basic repairs and maintenance is rare. Being able to purchase new or even newer equipment is frequently beyond reach. Many of the farms in Maine may know a path to improve efficiency and profitability but lack the funds to achieve it.
- Unpredictable weather—droughts followed by rain and windstorms—is devastating yields and making long-term planning nearly impossible.

- Our equipment and infrastructure need modernization to remain competitive, but capital is scarce when profit margins are razor thin.
- The next generation of farmers is being priced out by rising land costs and development pressure. We're at risk of losing the knowledge and work ethic that built Maine agriculture.
- One of the published goals for the State of Maine is *Produce 30% of our own food by 2030*. This is an important goal that matches the increasing demand for locally grown food. Without sufficient capital to keep farms and improve production this may never happen.

What makes this proposal fiscally responsible is that it directs funds through existing DACF programs. We're not building new bureaucracy or expanding government—we're leveraging programs that can deploy resources efficiently to working farms. Paying for large capital improvements over time is possible through General Obligation (GO) Bonds. The process spreads financial responsibility for long-term investments over the time and population that can expect to enjoy the benefits.

As a farmer and legislator a few of my concerns and issues with this bond proposal is the lack of guidance and guardrails in place. While the total funding may look impressive it will not go nearly far enough. The funds included need to go where they will have the most meaningful impact to Maine's agricultural and forestry industry.

- 1) These funds need to go to farms where they will improve farm income and stability for the future. Existing Farms that can utilize funding to make upgrades for the next step.
- 2) There needs to be some guardrails as to minimum size and production to be eligible \$30,000.00 - \$50,000.00 is a ballpark that comes up in discussions.
- 3) Farms need to be owned and operated by Maine citizens.
- 4) These funds need to go to working farms not NGO's or other networks.
- 5) The forestry fund portion of the bond needs to go toward improving the markets and options of low-grade wood fiber. {Chips and pulpwood}. We currently have way more harvest capacity than we have markets for. Proper management of our woodlands is critical and low-grade wood fiber is a byproduct of proper management.

It's my understanding that the Department of ACF is open to changes and further guardrails, which I support.

As both a legislator and a farmer, I'm asking this committee to support LD 2094 and send it to the floor for further discussion.

Thank you for your time. I'm happy to answer any questions.