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Senator Talbot-Ross, Representative Guerrette, and distinguished members of the Joint Committee on Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry:

I am Bill Pluecker, representing Warren, Hope, and Union in House District 44. Thank you for the opportunity to speak in support of my amendment to LD 299, An Act to Build a Viable Future for Maine Agriculture.

Maine's agricultural sector is the backbone of our rural communities, our food security, and our identity as a state. From vegetable farms in the midcoast to blueberry operations in Washington County, from working woodlands in the north to sea farms along our coast, the people who grow and harvest what feeds and sustains us deserve serious, sustained investment. This amendment takes a meaningful step toward delivering exactly that.

This bill is the result of many months of research by the Agriculture Council of Maine. After extensive discussion of different methods of raising revenue to support farms, the Council voted unanimously — or near unanimously — to support it. I believe this bill will not prove contentious in this committee, but because of the nature of the revenue raised by the Real Estate Transfer Tax, it will carry a \$5 million fiscal note and proceed to the Appropriations Committee for debate.

By dedicating a portion of real estate transfer tax revenues to the Maine Agriculture, Food and Forest Products Investment Fund, this amendment creates a reliable, recurring funding stream — one that does not depend on the annual budget process or compete with other pressing state priorities. These ongoing funds will also be of great long-term value to farmers when paired with the one-time funding represented by the bond currently sitting on the Appropriations table. Up

to \$5 million per fiscal year directed toward grants and low-interest revolving loans will give working producers the capital access they need to grow, modernize, and weather difficult seasons.

Equally important is the amendment's expansion of the definition of "producer" to explicitly include aquaculture and sea farming. Maine's coastal economy is inseparable from its agricultural one, and recognizing sea farmers alongside their land-based counterparts reflects the full breadth of what Maine grows and harvests.

The \$10,000 gross income threshold is a practical and fair benchmark — low enough to include small and beginning farmers, while ensuring funds reach those with demonstrated, active operations. It does not impair the board's ability to write rules for startups, though these dollars will remain earmarked for established producers.

Maine's farms and food producers cannot wait. I urge this committee to advance this amendment without delay.