



Maine Dairy Industry Association

Neither For, Nor Against

LD 437 An Act to Establish the Maine Healthy Soils Program

March 4, 2021

Senator Dill, Representative O'Neil, and members of the Joint Standing Committee on Agriculture, Conservation & Forestry:

The Maine Dairy Industry Association is the trade guild that represents all of the Maine cow dairy farms who are shipping milk for drinking or food production. Most of our farm families also grow the hay, corn, alfalfa, and other cover crops that are used to feed their animals on the over 700,000 acres of fields and forests directly under their stewardship. In addition, many other farms focus solely on producing feed for cattle and other ruminants, raise beef cattle or dairy beef (which is a way of referring to male cattle, since only female cows can give milk), or breed and raise replacement dairy cows.

Soil is the blend of ecological materials that provide the conducive environment required for plant material to grow and develop. **In order to maximize the quantity and quality of plants grown, the quality and health of the soil environment is essential.**

Maine's dairy farmers have made the long-term health and enrichment of soil a priority for decades. Animal agriculture, such as dairy, has been able to merge the mutual goals of replenishing soils that grows the food that feed our animals, with minimizing the impact of the farm on water sources by utilizing a natural by-product from our animals to return nutrients to the soils. Our farmers have engaged in continuing education to learn new ways of enhancing the soils as an effort to improve crop production and reduce erosion, and have had consistent access to changing best practices and training through entities like UM Cooperative Extension, NRCS, and other agencies, as well as from private agronomic consultants and experts. Any effort to support the education and implementation of soil enhancement and rejuvenation activities is welcome.

Much of this information already exists. It may be that statutory language is not required to implement this assistance to farmers to work on improving the health of their soil. Under the existing DACF/Bureau of Ag mission and responsibilities, this could be incorporated into the educational and operational technical assistance provided by the various current programs within their structure.

MDIA supports the intent of the bill in bringing additional focus and coordinating existing resources to help all farmers improve the quality and sustainability of their soils. With a formal recognition that soils are part of the climate change adaptation solution, this is an effort that is more important than ever.

However, the creation of a non-lapsing Maine Healthy Soils fund seems both unnecessary and premature.

- If the concern is that future funds to support the financial costs associated with this program (which the DACF has stated as being able to be absorbed within existing resources) need to be placed in a dedicated account to protect them from "raiding" by other priorities in state government to be diverted for other purposes, almost all federal monies come with strict requirements and accounting procedures that are designed to ensure that the funding is used appropriately. Also, the Bureau Director, Commissioner, and Governor are all in positions of authority to honor the intent of the funds and ensure that actions that would

not divert or diminish the fund. The Legislature also has the authority to protect those funds and ensure they are used for their intended purpose. However, **no dedicated funds are sacrosanct in the state budget process if the phrase “not withstanding any other section of law” is used** in a package to achieve the required balanced biennial budget. Nothing in this bill changes or guarantees protection from this action.

- DACF has stated that there would be no additional funds necessary to implement this act but could be incorporated within existing resources and enhanced through the hiring of a new state soil scientist. So it seems unnecessary to create a new fund – especially prior to any concretely identified funding source and/or accompanying requirements to receive such funds having been established. The Department already has mechanisms in place to allow and enable the State to received federal funds and other grants.
- If the Department is anticipating needing to utilize 3rd party contractors to help deliver information and services related healthy soils education, then efforts and related funding should directed toward those entities as a qualified recipient and not use valuable state resources in being an accounting pass-through organization. We already have identified many groups already providing these services in Maine. In today’s world of grants, efforts that demonstrate collaboration between entities are very common and often receive higher ratings in determining awards than single entities – even if they are state government agencies.

Thank you for your consideration of the items presented in this testimony.

Julie-Marie R. Bickford
Executive Director
Maine Dairy Industry Association