



SIERRA CLUB

MAINE CHAPTER

PO Box 1374
Yarmouth, ME 04096
Phone: (207) 761-5616
www.sierraclub.org/maine

To: Committee on Agriculture, Conservation, and Forestry

From: Andrew Blunt, Sierra Club Maine

Date: March 3, 2021

Re: Testimony in Support of LD 437 **An Act To Establish a Maine Health Soils Program**

Senator Dill, Representative O'Neil, and Members of the Joint Committee on Agriculture, Conservation, and Forestry. My name is Andrew Blunt and I proudly write as a representative of Sierra Club Maine's over 20,000 members and supporters. Founded in 1892, Sierra Club is one of our nation's oldest and largest environmental organizations. We work diligently to amplify the power of our 3.8 million members nation-wide as we defend everyone's right to a healthy world, and we strongly support L.D. 437 in our pursuit of that mission.

The value of healthy soils can hardly be understated. Soils rich with organic matter and biodiversity, a strong structure, and holding high amounts of water and nutrients, mean healthy ecosystems, healthy farms, and a healthy agricultural economy. But with time and repeated use, soils degrade. This can result in erosion, losses in nutrient and water holding capacities, and, ultimately, lower yields for the farmers relying on them.

But this progression is not inevitable. A variety of healthy soils practices are in a farmers tool kit to mitigate soil degradation and keep their soils healthy. These include low or no-till farming, organic farming methods, cover-cropping, and rotational grazing, among others. These conscious efforts to maintain soil health can naturally keep productivity high and can reduce farm costs associated with pesticides and fertilizers, as healthier soils produce more resilient and successful crops.

Fostering healthy soils can also help combat climate change. As Maine's Climate Council found in their December 2020 report, "Natural climate solutions, such as soil-health practices, should be a priority for state agricultural programs." High rates of carbon, nitrogen, and phosphorus sequestration in healthy soils, makes improving soil health a means of drawing down atmospheric greenhouse gases. Beyond soil's strong sequestration potential, farms with healthier soils will be more resilient in the face of increasingly severe weather events associated with climate change, such as heatwaves, droughts, and unpredictable frosts.

While some healthy soils practices may be well-known and many of Maine's farmers already practice them, accessing resources and information remains a significant barrier. L.D. 437 is the right step forward to provide farmers the resources that they need to adapt to a changing climate and contribute to mitigating it. There are three core aspects of this bill that motivate our support for this particular legislative step:

1. L.D. 437 offers support for fully voluntary agricultural practices. By establishing the Maine Healthy Soils Program, this bill does not intend to, nor will it, mandate any particular practices. It will only provide resources to those seeking them, an educational, grassroots means of building support for these practices.
2. Establishing the Maine Department of Agriculture, Conservation, and Forestry as a place where farmers can access resources, peer-learning opportunities, grant information, technical assistance, and other general information on healthy soils practices can be aggregated is a natural progression. In many cases the Department is a service and resource provider for farmers, and establishing this program at the state level would build on that role, would ensure sustainability and continuity across administrations, and would be a symbol of state-level support of these practices, all at no additional cost to the Department or the taxpayer.
3. L.D. 437 is forward looking. The bill establishes a non-appropriated fund ready to receive any federal and philanthropic funding targeting soil health, and redistribute those resources to farmers as they become available. U.S. Representative Chellie Pingree's Agriculture Resilience Act, which would provide federal grants to states with healthy soils programs like the one proposed here today, serves as a useful example.

Farmers have a more intimate relationship with our state's land than the vast majority of Mainers. Their livelihoods are firmly anchored to the land, making them key stewards and a vast wealth of environmental knowledge and experience. As climate change quickly moves us into uncertain times, we must recognize the role that agricultural solutions can play in mitigation and adaptation to these new environmental realities. The Sierra Club stands in solidarity with our farmers on legislation like L.D 437 that promises to support and uplift them in their work.

For the above reasons, we, at the Sierra Club - Maine Chapter, urge you to vote ought-to-pass on L.D. 437.

Respectfully,

Andrew Blunt
Legislative Team Volunteer