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Senator, District 30

THE MAINE SENATE
130th Legislature

388 Broadturn Road
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Introducing LD 437, “An Act To Establish The Maine Healthy Soils Program”

Joint Standing Committee on Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry

March 4, 2021

Senator Dill, Representative O’Neil and honorable members of the Joint Standing Committee on Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry. I am Stacy Brenner and I represent Senate District 30, which is Gorham, most of Scarborough and part of Buxton. I’m here today to introduce LD 437, “An Act To Establish The Maine Healthy Soils Program.”

Sir Albert Howard said:

“All the great agricultural systems which have survived have made it their business never to deplete the earth of its fertility without at the same time beginning the process of restoration.”

I come before you today with my farming hat on. I always wanted to be a farmer. For me, it’s a constant process of being humbled, much like I’ve found the work of the legislature these last few months.

I went to a land grant university and studied plant sciences. My soils professor said to us on the first day of class: Dirt is what is on the floor, soil is what supports life.

Soil is foundational to farming. The land I am lucky enough to grow crops on is a prime agricultural soil of statewide importance. It’s the basis for all of the success of my business. In fact, Broadturn Farm’s mission statement is to build soils to last a lifetime.

The bill you are considering today is designed to set up a framework to last beyond our lifetime as legislators and beyond the current administration. It is written to place our stamp of value on the importance of soil as a resource that is deserving of strong collaboration between the Department of Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry, the University of Maine, Cooperative Extension and the farmers in our great state.

Let me start by telling you what this bill is not. It is not a mandate. It is not a regulatory action on farming practices as some may fear.

This bill sets up a voluntary, incentive based program to support healthy soil management practices on farms throughout our great state. It supports farmers in Kittery and Lubec,

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Bowdoinham and Bridgewater. Every county in Maine has a farming community who will benefit from this bill.

In the work done by the Climate Council's Natural and Working Land's group, they prioritized **financial incentives and technical support for** innovative land management and natural climate solutions that increase carbon storage, and reduce greenhouse gas emissions as a way to help farmers and landowners prepare for climate change impacts.

This bill is a vehicle to realize this goal.

I just want to walk you through a few details of the legislation.

Starting on page 1, line 16, #5 describes healthy soil best practices. This section is based on our best science to describe healthy soils and identify the characteristics that we know to be true about soil health.

Importantly, on line 5, page 2, section 1, this bill's purpose is to improve the health, yield and profitability of our farms, help make our farms more climate ready and to use our best soil science to drive education for farmers.

I want to address line 30 on page 2: Investigate opportunities for market-based levers and promotional activities that incentivize healthy soils best practices. This line has prompted some conversation by some in the farming community and I want to bring it to your attention. The goal here is to communicate to the consumer base in and out of the state that when a product is labeled REAL MAINE, consumers associate that with a message of food produced in Maine on healthy soils with climate smart practices. This is about celebrating our soils in the market to elevate the Maine brand.

Lines 32 on page 2 address the potential for programming, technical assistance and financial incentives for farmers who implement healthy soils best practices. This is where the collaboration with the Department, the University and future funding from the USDA and NRCS could be realized.

And finally, Line 41 sets up a fund that can receive and house financial support from any future federal and/or philanthropic source.

I'm a first generation farmer. I farm on rented land and I work hard at soil stewardship, knowing this soil is just passing through my hands and will someday be in the hands of another. In the 20 years I've farmed in Maine, I've been blessed to call the University of Maine, Cooperative Extension and the Department great service providers.

In the last 20 years, I've learned that Maine is loaded with smart, talented farmers who are deeply committed to the industry, their land and the state we all call home. Most of them are already engaged in many of the healthy soils best practices outlined in this legislation

So why, you ask, submit a bill that puts soil practices into statute?

It's a statement of value, a call to action, a solidification of the importance of healthy soils going forward so we can protect our most valuable agricultural resource past the time of the 130th, past

the time of this administration. A vote of Ought to Pass on LD 437 states a commitment to what all farmers value, our soils.

Let's work together to protect and steward our rich earth. I urge you to pass LD 437 and commit our state to prioritizing a healthy soils program.

Thank you and be well.