



Testimony in Support of LD 437, An Act to Establish the Maine Healthy Soils Program

By David Costello, Climate & Clean Energy Program Director

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Senator Dill, Representative O’Neil, and distinguished members of the Agriculture, Conservation, and Forestry Committee. My name is David Costello. I am the Climate and Clean Energy Program Director at the Natural Resources Council of Maine (NRCM), and I am testifying today in support of LD 437, An Act to Establish the Maine Healthy Soils Program.

Improving Maine’s Soil Health: A Win-Win for Maine Farmers and the Environment

Improving Maine’s soil health is key to increasing the yield, profitability, and resilience of our farms and farm products and is vital to our expanding efforts to reduce carbon pollution and mitigate the increasingly harmful impacts of climate change. Climate-friendly and soil-enriching agricultural practices like cover cropping, reduced tillage, and rotational grazing sequester carbon while preventing soil erosion and improving the water and nutrient holding capacity of our farmland. These cost-effective agricultural methods help Maine farms and farming communities become more resilient and productive in the face of increasing droughts and extreme weather events.

Expanding Help to Maine Farmers and Farming Communities

The establishment of the Maine Healthy Soils Program would improve the vitality of Maine’s agricultural soils by making information on emerging science and best practices more easily available to Maine farmers and farmland owners. The Program would do this by:

- Accumulating and distributing best practices information and materials;
- Maintaining an active network of practitioners and technical experts;
- Increasing farmer-to-farmer outreach and peer learning opportunities; and
- Aggregating and highlighting financial assistance and market-based opportunities.

Broad and Growing Benefits

With the Maine Healthy Soils Program, Maine farmers and farming communities would accrue more benefits. Specifically, the Program would help farmers improve their ability to enhance the capacity of their soils to:

- Reduce soil erosion, sediment, and dust;

- Host a diversity of beneficial organisms;
- Grow healthier, more vigorous crops;
- Enhance agricultural resilience, including, but not limited to, the ability of crops and livestock to tolerate and recover from drought, extreme temperatures and storms, and pests and other stressors;
- Remove carbon and other pollutants from our atmosphere;
- Enhance water retention, ground water infiltration, and water quality;
- Retain important nutrients, including, but not limited to, nitrogen and phosphorus;
- Reduce the use of chemical fertilizers and polluting run-off; and
- Increase biodiversity and wildlife habitat, including for grazing animals, birds, beneficial insects, and keystone species, such as earthworms.

Moreover, the Healthy Soils Program would aid in enhancing local food production and security, and the vitality and prosperity of Maine's farming communities.

Maine Climate Action Plan Priority

Maine's Climate Action Plan rightly prioritizes providing Maine farmers with the information, tools, and technical assistance needed to help confront climate change. Establishing a Maine Healthy Soils program is an essential and cost-effective first step.

For these reasons, NRCM urges the Committee to support this important agricultural and environmental initiative. Thank you for your consideration, and I welcome any questions.