



MAINE FARMLAND TRUST

**Testimony of Ellen Stern Griswold, Policy and Research Director, Maine Farmland Trust, before the
130th Legislature's Joint Standing Committee on Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry
March 4, 2021**

Good morning Senator Dill, Representative O'Neil, and members of the Joint Standing Committee on Agriculture, Conservation, and Forestry. My name is Ellen Griswold, and I am testifying today on behalf of Maine Farmland Trust (MFT) in support of LD 437 – *An Act to Establish the Maine Healthy Soils Program*.

MFT is a member-powered statewide organization that works to protect farmland, support farmers, and advance the future of farming. Since our founding in 1999, MFT has helped to permanently protect nearly 300 farms and keep over 60,000 acres of farmland in farming, while supporting over 800 farm families with a range of services. Our four main program areas are Farmland Protection, Farmland Access, Farm Viability in the form of business planning and technical assistance to help farmers become and remain economically viable, and Public Outreach and Policy to grow the future of farming in Maine.

MFT understands that climate change is one of the most daunting challenges of our time, and will have significant impacts on Maine's agricultural sector. As the state's updated climate action plan makes clear, "[w]arming temperatures and increasingly variable precipitation, including droughts and extreme weather events, are causing damage to farm livelihoods, impacting farmers, workers, crops, and livestock."¹ These impacts could have ramifications for the entire state, as agriculture is a key component of Maine's economy, contributing over \$3.6 billion in economic impact and supporting over 27,000 jobs statewide according to an analysis by Farm Credit East.² At the same time, warming temperatures could provide new seasonal opportunities for Maine farmers³ if farmers have the right tools to adapt to the changing climate.

Over the last 16 months or so, I have appreciated being a part of the Maine Climate Council's Natural and Working Lands Working Group, and MFT was thrilled to see the inclusion of many important agriculture-related strategies in the new climate action plan. Principal among those strategies was providing farmers with greater support to build soil health through increased financial, technical, and research assistance, thereby enhancing farm resilience and profitability, and sequestering greenhouse gas emissions.⁴ Soils can become depleted over time through repeated use, which can result in soil erosion, nutrient and water holding issues, and lower crop yields. Continually improving

¹ The Maine Climate Council, "Maine Won't Wait: A Four-Year Plan for Climate Action," (Dec. 2020), 25, available at https://climatecouncil.maine.gov/future/sites/maine.gov.future/files/inline-files/MaineWontWait_December2020_printable_12.1.20.pdf (Maine Climate Action Plan).

² Farm Credit East, "Northeast Economic Engine: Agriculture, Forest Products and Commercial Fishing," (2020), available at: <https://www.farmcrediteast.com/knowledge-exchange/Reports/2020%20Northeast%20Economic%20Engine>.

³ Maine Climate Action Plan at 25.

⁴ See e.g. Maine Climate Action Plan at 66, 69, 78-80.

soil health helps to prevent these challenges, naturally keeping productivity high and enhancing agricultural resilience to droughts, pests, and heat waves, among other impacts.

LD 437 would further this critical climate plan strategy of creating greater support for farmers by establishing a program within the Department of Agriculture, Conservation, and Forestry that connects farmers with key resources and equips them with the tools and knowledge they need to begin voluntarily using healthy soil practices. Over the last couple of years, and especially after the terrible drought conditions last year, an increasing number of farmers want to know more about soil health and how it can benefit their farms. In fact, after circulating for only five days, over 100 farmers signed onto a letter supporting LD 437, which I have attached to my testimony.

LD 437 would make soil health a priority for the Department, and in doing so, ensure that farmers in the state have easy access to the information and support services they want. While many organizations in Maine provide excellent soil health resources, farmers' access to those resources would be much improved through a coordinated state program. L.D. 437 would provide this coordination by creating a one-stop shop for soil health information that both connects interested farmers with farmers who have experience with soil health practices, and promotes the technical, research, and financial assistance services offered by the University of Maine, Cooperative Extension, Soil and Water Conservation District offices, the Natural Resources Conservation Service, and many other organizations and businesses.

It is important to emphasize that LD 437 does not mandate the use of practices to build soil health, nor does it even require that particular agricultural practices be promoted. Instead, the bill focuses on promoting practices that are aligned with soil health principles, and which are consistently reevaluated based upon the experience of farmers, emerging soil science, and indigenous knowledge. The bill would also establish a fund to house and distribute any future federal or philanthropic funding to farmers and service providers to support soil health practices. There are proposals circulating in Congress now to provide state programs with funding to support soil health. By passing LD 437, we can ensure that those resources are available in Maine.

For all of these reasons, we hope that you will support this bill and ensure that agriculture remains a vibrant part of Maine's economy.

LD 437 - AN ACT TO ESTABLISH THE MAINE HEALTHY SOILS PROGRAM

Help farmers get the resources and knowledge they need to build healthy soils, at no additional cost to the taxpayer

LD 437 “An Act to Establish the Maine Healthy Soils Program” would create a program within the Department of Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry to promote and expand the use of healthy soils practices among farmers. The Program would provide a one-stop shop for information about healthy soils practices, including how farmers can use these voluntary practices; the technical assistance services offered by agriculture service providers to help farmers use these practices; information about farmers who are using these practices successfully to facilitate farmer to farmer education; and information about funding opportunities to support the use of these practices.

What is soil health?

Soil health can be measured in various ways, but there are some overarching qualities that healthy soils all have in common. They have high rates of organic matter and biodiversity, a strong structure, and they hold high amounts of water and nutrients.

Why is soil health important?

Healthy soils mean healthy ecosystems, healthy farms, and a healthy agricultural sector in Maine. With time and repeated use, soils degrade. This can result in soil erosion, nutrient and water holding issues, and lower crop yields. Continually improving soil health helps prevent these challenges, naturally keeping productivity high and enhancing agricultural resilience to droughts, pests, and heat waves, among others. It can also reduce farm costs associated with pesticides and fertilizers, as healthier soils produce more resilient crops.

Fostering healthy soils can also help combat climate change. With high rates of carbon, nitrogen, and phosphorus stored in healthy soils, improving soil health can work as a method to draw down greenhouse gases.



Photo by Bridget Besaw - Cover crops at Six River Farm in Bowdoinham. Cover cropping is one of the easiest ways to add organic matter to the soil. It also shades the soil and prevents weeds from taking root and growing.

What are healthy soils practices?

There are a variety of healthy soils land management practices, including: low/no-till farming, conservation tillage, organic farming methods, cover-cropping, integrated crop-livestock systems, among others. This is only a short list of the available tools at a farmer's disposal if they are interested in building soil health.

Soil science and knowledge around soil health is constantly evolving. For that reason, LD 437 does not articulate particular practices that the program must promote, instead ensuring that the best practices are consistently reevaluated based on the experience of farmers, soil science, and indigenous knowledge.

Why now?

Maine has a long history of agriculture, environmental stewardship, and conservation leadership. LD 437 recognizes that in the face of climate change, we must act to mitigate current and emerging vulnerabilities for Maine's farmers and farmland owners. Maine farmers are already facing increased extreme weather events and climate-related challenges, such as high precipitation events, excessive drought, and increased unpredictability of frost. Healthy soils practices can help Maine's agricultural sector become more resilient and more profitable, remain an important part of Maine's economy, and contribute to the state's climate change strategy.

Why support the Maine Healthy Soils Program?

This bill ensures that the Department of Agriculture, Conservation, and Forestry offers key resources to farmers and equips them with the tools and knowledge that they need to begin voluntarily using healthy soil practices – an important climate adaptation strategy. The Department would become a one-stop-shop for all information on: healthy soils management practices; farmers across Maine who are implementing these practices; funding opportunities to help interested farmers implement these practices; and peer-to-peer learning opportunities. L.D. 437 is about connecting farmers with the resources and knowledge that they need, at no additional cost to the taxpayer.

**LD 437 WOULD
ALSO ESTABLISH
A FUND TO HOUSE
AND DISTRIBUTE
ANY FUTURE
FEDERAL OR
PHILANTHROPIC
FINANCIAL
SUPPORT FOR
THIS PROGRAM.**

For more information about this bill and the benefits of healthy agricultural soils, please contact:

- Maine Farmland Trust, **Ellen Griswold**, egriswold@mainefarmlandtrust.org, 207-338-6575 ex. 307
- Maine Organic Farmers and Gardeners Association, **Heather Spalding**, heathers@mofga.org, 207-568-6006
- Sierra Club, Maine Chapter, **Andrew Blunt**, andrew.blunt97@gmail.com, 207-752-1320

An Open Letter From Maine Farmers To

President of the Maine Senate Troy Jackson
Speaker of the Maine House of Representatives Ryan Fecteau
Chair of the Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry Committee Senator Jim Dill
Chair of the Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry Committee Representative Maggie O'Neil
and Members of the Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry Committee: Senator Russell Black; Senator Chloe Maxmin; Representative Sue Bernard; Representative Jeffrey Gifford; Representative Randy Hall; Representative Scott Landry; Representative David McCrea; Representative Laurie Osher; Representative Bill Pluecker; Representative Thomas Skolfield; and Representative Joseph Underwood

as of March 4, 2021

Dear President of the Senate Troy Jackson, Speaker of the House Ryan Fecteau, and Members of the Joint Standing Committee on Agriculture, Conservation, and Forestry,

We, the farmers signed below, write in support of L.D. 437 “An Act to Establish the Maine Healthy Soils Program,” which would create a program within the Department of Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry to promote and expand the use of healthy soils practices among farmers. This program would help farmers get the resources and knowledge they need to build healthy soils, at no additional cost to the taxpayer. As farmers relying on productive and healthy soils for our livelihoods, we strongly support the passage of L.D. 437 as a means to protect both agriculture in Maine and Maine’s environment.

We support L.D. 437 for the following key reasons:

It ensures that the Department of Agriculture, Conservation, and Forestry connects farmers with key resources so that they are equipped with the tools and knowledge they need to begin voluntarily using healthy soil practices.

It offers a one-stop-shop for all information on: healthy soils management practices; farmers across Maine who are implementing these practices; funding opportunities to help interested farmers implement these practices; and peer-to-peer learning opportunities.

Healthy soils practices are an important climate adaptation strategy, making farmers more resilient to the impacts of climate change. Fostering healthy soils can also capture high rates of carbon, nitrogen, and phosphorus, improving soil nutrient density while drawing down greenhouse gases.

Eleven states have already passed healthy soils legislation, and 14 state legislatures currently have healthy soils bills under consideration. This legislation has the potential to reframe the value that our state places on its agricultural soils as a driver of our agricultural economy, an opportunity to mitigate the impacts of climate change, and, ultimately, as a key natural resource.

We urge you to vote ought-to-pass on L.D. 437.

Sincerely,

- Carl Davis, Twin Maples Farm, Acton
- Katherine Richman, Appleton Fruit and Flower, Appleton
- Galen & Bonnie Young, Argyle Acres, Argyle Township
- Monique A. Allen, Rivendell Farm, Augusta
- Maggie Smith, Smith Family Farm, Bar Harbor
- Shana Hanson, 3 Streams Farm, Belfast
- Dan Barnett-Parker, Belfast Bay Wild Blueberries, Belfast
- Jeffrey Benton & Erin Ehlers, Orange Circle Farm, Berwick
- Rebecca Norklun, Good Dirt Garden, Bowdoin
- Charlotte Ferguson, Dandelion Spring Farm, Bowdoinham
- Sean Hagan, Left Field Farm, Bowdoinham
- Phillip Cuddeback, Phils Farm LLC, Bowdoinham
- Nathan Drummond & Gabrielle Gosselin, Six River Farm, Bowdoinham
- Beth Schiller, Dandelion Spring Farm, Bowdoinham
- Caleb & Jim Gerritsen, Wood Prairie Family Farm, Bridgewater
- Jennifer Schroth & Jonathan Ellsworth, Carding Brook Farm, Brooklin
- Molly DellaRoman & Timothy Skillin, 5 Star Nursery and Orchard, Brooklin
- Carol Gregor, Tapley Farms, Brooksville
- Seth Kroeck & Maura Bannon, Crystal Spring Farm, Brunswick
- Renee Lang, Dancing Fox Farm, Brunswick
- Lucretia & Michael Woodruff, Milkweed Farm, Brunswick
- Jean Shaw, Pine Street, Brunswick
- Don Estes, Estes Blueberry Farm, Buxton
- Jonah & Elizabeth Fertig-Burd, Celebration Tree Farm & Wellness Center, Durham
- Carol Power, Power Farm, Falmouth
- Sarah Lutte, Lazy Acres Farm, Farmingdale
- Meredith Simonpietri, Forge House Farm, Farmington
- Erica Emery, Rustic Roots Farm, Farmington
- Garen Heller, Garen's Greens LLC, Franklin
- Margaret & Ryan Mitchell, South Paw Farm, Freedom
- Phyllis Gardiner & Logan Johnston, Oaklands Farm, Gardiner
- Katelynn Gentile, The Fiddlehead Homestead, Hancock
- Joseph & Laura Grady, Two Coves Farm, Harpswell
- Denise DeSpirito, Of the spirit herbals, Hope
- Fabien Roy, Roy's Maple Grove Corp., Jackman
- Rosey Guest, Bluebird Hill Farm, Jefferson
- Ryan & Mike Dennett, Crescent Run Farm, Jefferson
- Peter W. Curra, Curra Family Farm Trust, Knox
- Adrienne Lee & Ken Lamson, New Beat Farm, Knox
- Jerilyn Waterhouse, Spotted Acres, Levant
- Sarah Hager, Bounty O' Blooms, Limington
- Jean English, Bayberry Gardens, Lincolnville
- Keena Tracy, Little Ridge Farm LLC, Lisbon Falls
- Aaron Grim & Briis Wile, Cosmic Goat Farm, Litchfield
- Laura Neale, Black Kettle Farm, Lyman

- Michael Guillemette, BrookRidge Farm, Lyman
- Rebecca Stanley, Sunset Ridge Farm, Monmouth
- Andrew Smith & Caitlin Frame, The Milkhouse, Monmouth
- Naomi Brautigam & James Gagne, Dickey Hill Farm, Monroe
- Seth Yentes & Anna Shapley-Quinn, North Branch Farm, Monroe
- Lisa Kalan & Angela Baglione, Seek-No-Further Farmstead, Monroe
- (Lana) Joy Bueschen, Turning Page Farm, Monson
- Victoria & Andrew Marshall, Dorolenna Farm, Montville
- Douglas Van Horn, Twitchell Hill Blueberries, Montville
- Alain jr Quirion, Quwic Maple Syrup Farm Inc, Moose River
- Jennifer Brown, Willow Moon Ventures LLC, Morrill
- Anna Davis & David Levinson, Beech Hill Farm, Mount Desert
- Erin Parisien, Aroostook Beef Company, New Canada
- Lawrence Peaco, Waterhouse Farm, New Gloucester
- Kelsey Gibbs & Matthew Silverman, Wanderwood, Nobleboro
- Susanne Lee, Copper Woods Farm, North Yarmouth
- Jason Kafka, Checkerberry Farm, Parkman
- Nicolas Lindholm, Blue Hill Berry Co., Penobscot
- Debra & Glenn Viola, Fortune Smiles Farmstead LLC, Perham
- Tom Roberts, Snakeroot Organic Farm, Pittsfield
- Jackie Gardner, Moonset Farm, Porter
- Justin Miers, Seed to Bowl Farm, Portland
- Emma Lovering, Snowfields Farm, Pownal
- Ellen J Johnson, Lamb Cove Farm, Robbinston
- Karl North, Lamb Chop Ridge, Robbinston
- Jill Agnew, Willow Pond Farm, Sabattus
- Stacy Brenner & John Bliss, Broadturn Farm, Scarborough
- Emily Allis Springer, Meeting House Herb Farm, Scarborough
- Kelsey Herrington, Two Farmers Farm, Scarborough
- Betsy Creisher, Side A Brook Farm, Shapleigh
- Thomas A. Vigue, KiwiHill Farm, Sidney
- Orris Hewett, Hewett Farm & Logging, Skowhegan
- Kelly Payson-Roopchand & Anil Roopchand, Pumpkin Vine Family Farm LLC, Somerville
- Cheryl Wixson & Phillip McFarland, Rabbit Hill, Stonington
- Jennifer Minard & John Roscoe, Wild Tilt Farm, Sullivan
- Christopher Walke, Bumpa Farm and Nursery, Swanville
- Rhiannon Hampson & Gregory Stiner, Grace Pond Farm, Thomaston
- Alexandra Smith, Metaltail Farm, Thorndike
- Ben, Laura & Nick Whatley, Whatley Farm, Topsham
- Katheryn Langelier, Herbal Revolution Farm & Apothecary, Union
- Roberta R Bailey, Seven Tree Farm, Vassalboro
- Jo Ann Myers, Beau Chemin Farm, Waldoboro
- Eli Berry & Sharon Turner, Crystal Lake Farm and Nursery, Washington
- Abby Lydon & Jeff Knox, Dharma Farm, Washington
- Eliah Thanhauser, North Spore, Westbrook

- Suzanne Balbo, Crooked Door Farm, Whitefield
- Bambi Jones & David Moskovitz, Hidden Valley Farm, Whitefield
- Melissa Boynton, Natural Dawnings Herb Gardens, Whitefield
- Ben & Taryn Marcus, Sheepscoot General Store and Farm, Whitefield
- Annie Watson & Mike Moody, Sheepscoot Valley Farm, Whitefield
- Melissa Law, Ben Whalen, Jeff & Abby Fisher, Bumbleroot Organic Farm, Windham
- Laura Casserly, Good Land Farm, Windham
- Nathan & Katherine Clark, Reed Farm, Windsor
- Elizabeth Haines, Fisher Farm, Winterport
- Craig Hickman & Jop Blom, Annabessacook Farm, Winthrop
- Ron DiGravio & Cindy Townsend, Cranberry Rock Farm, Winthrop