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**TESTIMONY BEFORE THE JOINT STANDING COMMITTEE ON AGRICULTURE,
CONSERVATION AND FORESTRY**

In Support of 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, and Forestry, my name is Nancy McBrady. I am the Director of the Bureau of Agriculture, Food and Rural Resources within the Department of Agriculture, Conservation & Forestry. I am speaking on behalf of the Department in support of LD 437, “An Act To Establish the Maine Healthy Soils Program.”

Healthy soils are the basis of Maine’s natural resource economy and are a critical weapon in fighting climate change. Improving soil health through voluntary incentives has been identified as a strategy for natural climate solutions in the Maine Climate Council’s first Climate Action Plan, “Maine Won’t Wait.” Soil health practices can improve crop production, increase farm resilience to drought, reduce soil erosion, and sequester carbon. According to the US Census of Agriculture, practices that strengthen soil health such as no-till, reduced tillage, and cover crops doubled in Maine from 2012 to 2017. However, the Census also indicates that health-promoting techniques are not practiced on nearly three-quarters of our cropland. We’ve heard from farmers and stakeholders on the ground who say that more resources are needed to move these voluntary efforts forward and build a more resilient food economy.

In synch with the objectives of this bill, we see national and federal interest in soil health initiatives. The National Association of State Directors of Agriculture (NASDA) recognizes the “necessity of adapting to a changing climate that protects and enhances our nation’s natural resources, while also building a resilient agriculture and food supply chain.” In November 2020, NASDA and several other national organizations representing farmers, ranchers, forest owners, the food sector, and environmental advocates formed the Food and Agriculture Climate Alliance (FACA). This alliance is dedicated to working together to define and promote shared climate policy priorities. FACA unveiled 40+ policy recommendations to guide the development of federal climate legislation. Six focus areas guided this legislation, soil health being one of them. Additionally, we are aware of at least five states that have already passed state soil health laws, nine that have proposed legislation, and another five that have drafted legislation

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The Agriculture Resilience Act (AFA), which was introduced in the 116th Congress and will likely be reintroduced again in the 120th, would allow each state to receive up to \$5,000,000 to achieve its soil health program goals. To be eligible, a state legislature or tribal government shall have enacted and be currently funding a state soil health program. Federal entities look for strong partnerships on the ground as they consider grant awards. Enacting this legislation would leverage efforts by the Department and stakeholders on the ground and help ensure that we have a stronger voice when applying for federal resources.

The bill in front of us today would direct the Department to prioritize activities that provide information and other resources that promote soil health practices through voluntary, incentive-based programming, and to support the expanded reach of efforts of partners like the University of Maine, Cooperative Extension, and the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service. This legislation provides a framework for the Department to enhance its role in the education, outreach, and technical assistance needed for Maine farmers to implement practices to improve soil health and increase their resilience to the impacts of climate change. Farmers and other stakeholders are telling us that resources are needed to move such efforts forward. This bill would create a platform for the Department to leverage federal, state, and private resources.

The bill would also establish a non-lapsing dedicated revenue fund for grants, gifts, and fees, which could be used to support farmers directly in implementing soil health practices, as well as initiatives led by partnering entities and other Department activities as outlined in this bill. Such funding will be critical for the success of this program.

Finally, I should note that a recent vacancy within the Department due to a planned retirement has left an opening in the Bureau of Agriculture, Food and Rural Resources for a soils specialist position. As we prepare to fill this vacancy, we also see the opportunity to shape that position to support the initial goals of a healthy soils program, so this bill is well-timed from our perspective, and we encourage you to support it.

We would be happy to answer any questions now or at the work session.