



**Written Testimony
Before the Committee on Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry
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Re: LD 437 – An Act to Establish the Maine Healthy Soils Program

Senator Dill, Representative O’Neil, and Members of the Committee,

Conservation Law Foundation (CLF) is pleased to offer this written testimony to the Committee on Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry. CLF strongly supports LD 437, legislation that would establish the Maine Healthy Soils Program.

CLF is a nonprofit, member-supported advocacy organization that protects New England’s environment for the benefit of all people. We use the law, science, and the market to create solutions that preserve our natural resources, build healthy communities, and sustain a vibrant economy. CLF works to support sustainable agriculture in Maine for the many health, environmental, and economic benefits it provides our communities. CLF supports policies that help farmers invest in sustainable farming practices that protect water quality, reduce greenhouse gas emissions, and build climate resiliency.

Farmers are on the front lines of responding to the effects of climate change. Here in New England, farmers face shifting growing seasons and changing precipitation patterns, including extreme rainfall, drought, and warm winters followed by cold springs. Along with these shifting seasons, farmers will confront new types of pests and invasive species. At the same time, Maine’s farmers also face enormous economic hurdles. The U.S. Department of Agriculture’s (USDA) most recent survey found that farms in Maine averaged \$16,958 in annual net farm income.¹

Even as they face these obstacles, farmers are critical partners in the state’s efforts to combat climate change and support a healthy ecosystem. Building soil health can improve drought resilience, stormwater management, and water quality, all while sequestering carbon from the atmosphere. Healthy soils practices include conservation tillage, cover crops, planned grazing, integrated crop-livestock systems, and using organic practices. In addition to providing environmental benefits and combating climate change, these practices also increase farm productivity and profitability by optimizing inputs and increasing resiliency. A 2017 study by the

¹ USDA 2017 Census of Agriculture, Maine State Profile, https://www.nass.usda.gov/Publications/AgCensus/2017/Online_Resources/County_Profiles/Maine/cp99023.pdf.

National Association of Conservation Districts found that farmers can benefit from an economic return of over \$100 per acre by using cover crops and no-till practices. Supporting farmers' bottom lines is critical to ensuring that our communities have access to fresh, healthy food and that farmland remains in production.

LD 437 is a key step in supporting resilient, climate-smart agriculture in Maine. This bill would create the Maine Healthy Soils Program within the Department of Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry, which would provide farmers with the tools they need to adopt practices that improve soil health. The program would offer funding, technical assistance, and other support to make the transition to farming practices that build the soil and reap many associated benefits.

We are pleased that the bill includes language ensuring that the Maine Healthy Soils Program would support beginning and socially disadvantaged farmers.² Socially disadvantaged farmers have been systematically excluded from full participation in the agricultural sector as a result of discriminatory loan practices by the USDA and other injustices. It is critical to prioritize these communities in the allocation of the program's incentives, including funds, technical assistance, and education. It is especially important that Wabanaki tribes have access to the benefits of this program, which will build on indigenous knowledge of soil management.

We urge the passage of LD 437 as an important first step in investing in the health of our state's soils. The future of Maine's food system and our climate depend on it. Thank you for your consideration. Please do not hesitate to contact us if we can provide additional information.

² Socially disadvantaged farmers and ranchers are defined in federal law as belonging to a "group whose members have been subjected to racial or ethnic prejudice because of their identity as members of a group without regard to their individual qualities." 7 U.S.C. § 2279(a)(6).