



To: Joint Committee on Agriculture, Conservation, and Forestry

From: Julia St.Clair-Voiers, Maine Youth for Climate Justice

Date: March 4, 2021

Re: Testimony in support of L.D. 437 **An Act to Establish the Maine Healthy Soils Program**

Senator Dill, Representative O'Neil, and Members of the Joint Committee on Agriculture, Conservation, and Forestry, my name is Julia St.Clair-Voiers and I proudly write as a representative for Maine Youth for Climate Justice (MYCJ), a coalition of over 300 youth from across the state who are fighting for bold climate action and a just transition to a livable future in Maine. I am writing in support of LD 437 An Act to Establish the Maine Healthy Soils Program.

Soil stands as the foundation of gardening and farming and is constantly buzzing and teeming with the lives of insects, worms, and microscopic organisms. It is the very basis of all terrestrial life on earth and inherent to our very existence on this planet. Soil is also a symbol; we must nurture the ground we walk on, take care of what takes care of us. Building soil health is like building the health of a community; understanding relationships and feedback loops in an ongoing conversation. Soil has been what has kept me as an organizer and advocate, sometimes quite literally, rooted in my commitment to protecting the environment. Healthier soils mean healthier environments and healthier communities.

LD 437 aims to make the resources, tools, and technical assistance to achieve healthy soils more accessible to Maine's farmers, facilitating the adoption of more climate-focused soil practices. There are numerous ways to assess and measure soil health, but there is a general consensus around what can be considered healthy soil. Healthy soils have high rates of biodiversity, organic matter, and hold high amounts of water and nutrients. As stewards of the land, farmers can be part of the solutions to tackling the climate crisis, as soil plays a unique role in the carbon cycle with its incredible potential to sequester carbon from the atmosphere. 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.

MYCJ recognizes the extensital threat that climate change poses to our futures and to all future generations. There are innumerable ways in which agriculture is deeply connected to the climate crisis. There are also countless possibilities for solutions: rebuilding soil health, preserving land, and promoting healthier relationships with the landscape. It is clear that climate change particularly threatens Maine's agricultural community. As weather patterns shift with the changing climate, farmers will continue to face challenges including excessive droughts and unpredictable precipitation. The Maine Healthy Soils Program aims to equip farmers with the tools to mitigate and adapt to these challenges, protecting soil from degradation and sequestering carbon from the atmosphere. A key aspect of this bill is that it does not outline one proper way to maintain soil, but instead allows shifts and changes in soil health best practices based on the latest science. Farmers are an integral part of Maine's economy and carry with them Maine's agricultural heritage; they deserve access to the tools, resources, and technical assistance that can help them to properly care for the soil in the face of a changing climate.

Now is the time for Maine to take decisive action in tackling the climate crisis. LD 437 would directly support Maine's goals of reducing carbon and working towards net-zero emissions. The Maine Climate Council report "Maine Won't Wait", released last year, outlined the necessity of addressing soil in climate solutions. The Council identified fostering soil health and soil maintenance as a key aspect of climate change solutions and noted that the state should provide the resources and technology to assist farmers with mitigation and adaptation to climate change. By encouraging and supporting healthy soil practices, LD 437 is a step in the right direction, putting Maine on track to meet the Climate Council's goals and objectives around climate change adaptation, mitigation, and net-zero emissions.

Nationally, Maine has the opportunity to follow the trend of the region. Vermont, and most recently Massachusetts, have developed their own healthy soils programs. Maine, with its thriving agricultural sector, cannot fall behind on this shift. Maine U.S. Representative Chellie Pingree has also recently introduced the Agriculture Resilience Act which sets the goal of reaching net-zero emissions in agriculture by 2040, focusing on carbon sequestration. Improving soil health is a key policy area of the Agriculture Resilience Act, providing financial incentive for states to develop programs for soil health.

Maine Youth for Climate Justice believes in seeking bold solutions to the climate crisis, meeting the urgency that the science of the moment demands. For the above reasons, our coalition urges you to vote ought-to-pass on LD 437.

Thank you for your consideration.

Julia St.Clair-Voiers, Maine Youth for Climate Justice