



Gaining ground for farmers

Testimony before the Joint Standing Committee on Agriculture, Conservation, and Forestry

March 18, 2021

Submitted by Dr. James A. H. Hafner, Executive Director, Land For Good

RE: Support for LD 568 – An Act to Establish a Working Farmland Access and Protection Program within the Department of Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry and a Working Farmland Access and Protection Fund within Land for Maine’s Future Program

Senator Dill, Representative O’Neil, and members of the Joint Standing Committee on Agriculture, Conservation, and Forestry, my name is Jim Hafner, and I am the Executive Director of Land For Good. We are not-for-profit farm service and advocacy organization that works New England-wide with and for farmers and farmland owners on issues of land access, land tenure security and farm transfer and succession. Directly and through our ME Field Agent (and farmer) we collaborate closely on these issues in Maine with MOFGA, Maine Farmland Trust, Extension, and many others.

I appreciate this opportunity to submit testimony on behalf of AFT **in support** of LD 568 – An Act to Establish a Working Farmland Access and Protection Program within the Department of Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry (DACF) and a Working Farmland Access and Protection Fund within Land for Maine’s Future (LMF) Program

Land For Good ‘s mission is to put more farmers securely on land and keep land in farming with viable farms. a farmer-field agent based in Maine. Through one-on-one technical assistance, training, education and collaboration, we reach hundreds of ME farmers, farm landowners and their advocates and supporters every year.

Land is the foundation of the state’s food system, and Maine farmers play a key role in the region’s food system and is a key destination for our region’s next generation of farmers. Maine has the most agricultural land of any of the six New England states by far, as well as the largest amount of prime and important farmland. But Maine is losing farmland to development and other pressures. These pressures include development of farmland into other uses, climate change impacts, and high land prices. More must be done to address the growing threats to Maine’s farmland and by extension, viable farms.

The LMF has permanently protected 41 farms and nearly 10,000 acres of farmland with agricultural conservation easements (ACE) over its lifetime. But overall, less than one percent of the state's farmland is protected. AFT's 2020 Status of State Purchase of Agricultural Conservation Easement Programs shows that despite having the largest amount of prime and important farmland in the region, the State of Maine has spent the least amount of state funds on farmland protection compared to the rest of New England. To date, Maine has expended nearly \$12.6 million on farmland protection efforts over the entire life of the LMF. The establishment of a dedicated fund for farmland protection efforts in Maine will protect more farmland for future generations.

The time for putting a Farmland Protection Program into state statute is now. Working lands lie at the heart of the state's food and agricultural system. As Maine looks towards building a robust, equitable, and resilient agricultural economy, farmland affordability and accessibility is essential. Maine's new and beginning farmers are key to ensuring the agricultural sector continues for future generations. According to recent reports from the American Farm Bureau Federation and the National Young Farmers coalition, access to affordable farmland remains a key barrier to new and young farmers, from farm and non-farm backgrounds alike. Agricultural Conservation Easements lower the real estate price of a farm and help make the land more affordable to new and beginning farmers wishing to expand their farming operation. Establishing a farmland preservation program that looks critically and intentionally at farmland access for new and beginning farmers will be essential to the future of Maine's agricultural sector. Other state programs and legislation in the region provide ideas for additional tools to address farmland affordability and accessibility.

We know through our work with farmers of all types and stages, that farmers use farmland protection funds to invest in the farm and business, to innovate and also to allow an exit from farming and transfer farms to the next generation. More viable farms has a ripple effect in the local economy and community as well. Protecting farmland and enhancing the long-term tenure security of farmers is a key incentive to the adoption of stewardship practices that provide a wide range of ecological services, including climate change mitigation. As Maine prepares to implement mitigation, adaptation, and resiliency strategies to combat climate change, formalizing a state farmland preservation program is a key component of these efforts.

Establishing a Working Farmland Access and Protection Fund within LMF will also help leverage additional federal resources through the USDA – Natural Resource Conservation Service's (NRCS). A Working Farmland Access and Protection Fund would set the state up to receive additional matching funds through USDA-NRCS – ACEP-ALE program. As of the end of 2020, Maine protected 10 farms using USDA-ACEP-ALE funding and leveraged around \$1.7 million in federal funds to do so. If passed, LD 568 would create the opportunity to leverage more of these funds through the ACEP-ALE program commensurate with the allocation of state funding to LFM and earmarked for farmland protection/

We support the establishment of a review panel to advise the Commissioner of Agriculture in the operation of the program. However, we suggest that the legislature consider establishing a time limit for project application review so that applications that utilize USDA-NRCS funding do not risk losing out on this federal matching funding. Projects that leverage federal ACEP-ALE funds involve many vigorous review steps, including time sensitive appraisals to assess a farm's agricultural value.

Establishment of a Working Farmland Access and Protection Program within the DACF and a Working Farmland Access and Protection Fund within LMF, as outlined in LD 568, will advance farmland protection efforts and in so doing, support farmland access and transfer, help expand farming opportunity in the state, increase the profitability and resiliency of Maine's farms, and expand adoption of climate smart farming practices.

As regional leaders in farmland access, tenure security please feel free to reach out to us at Land For Good (jim@landforgood.org) with any questions or input needs around how a farmland protection program and dedicated fund in Maine can be best designed and implemented to support farmers' access to farmland and transitioning land to the next generation of farmers.

Land For Good joins others in supporting the state's efforts to establish a Working Farmland Access and Protection Program within the Department of Agriculture, Conservation, and Forestry, and a Working Farmland Access and Protection Fund within the LMF.

We strongly urge you to support and pass LD 568. Thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony.