



**Testimony of Abby Farnham, Policy and Research Associate, Maine Farmland Trust, before the
130th Legislature's Joint Standing Committee on Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry
March 25, 2021**

Good morning Senator Dill, Representative O'Neil, and members of the Joint Standing Committee on Agriculture, Conservation, and Forestry. My name is Abby Farnham, and I am here today on behalf of Maine Farmland Trust (MFT) to speak in support of LD 691 – *An Act to Support Farms and Address Food Insecurity*, but to ask that the bill be held over to the 2022 legislative session.

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 (helping farmers get on the land), Farm Viability (helping farmers become and remain economically viable), and Public Outreach and Policy to grow the future of farming in Maine. Although we believe that our farmland protection program is necessary to ensure that we have the land base to grow our agricultural economy and increase access to land for farmers in Maine, MFT also knows that the best way to protect farmland is to keep farmers in business. The nutrition incentive programs operated by MFT and others in the state contribute to the economic success of farms and local food businesses by helping them gain new customers, build sales, and keep more dollars in Maine's food economy.

Nutrition incentive programs in Maine increase the purchasing power of federal nutrition benefits spent on local foods, enabling people struggling with food insecurity to buy more of the food that Maine farmers are growing. First introduced in Maine at farmers' markets, these programs have expanded to Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) programs, farm stands, mobile markets, and retail stores. MFT has been operating a nutrition incentive program since it was awarded a federal Food Insecurity Nutrition Incentive (FINI) grant from the United States Department of Agriculture in 2015. We are currently a partner in the regional New England Nutrition Incentive Collaborative FINI grant, alongside the Maine Federation of Farmers' Markets which manages the Maine Harvest Bucks nutrition incentive program. MFT's program, Farm Fresh Rewards, doubles Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program benefits (SNAP) spent on local food at retail stores. For every \$5 a customer using SNAP spends on any local foods – including dairy, eggs, meat, poultry, maple syrup, and more – the customer receives a \$5 bonus voucher to purchase additional Maine-grown fruits and vegetables. The Farm Fresh Rewards program currently operates in 18 stores, and we hope to recruit new outlets to the program this spring. The Farm Fresh Rewards store network sources a wide variety of products from over 400 Maine farms each year.

Nutrition incentive programs in Maine and across the country have experienced significant growth during the Covid-19 pandemic. Throughout 2020, Farm Fresh Rewards customers earned over \$162,000 in incentive dollars by purchasing Maine-produced food with SNAP, and customers

redeemed over \$158,000 in incentive dollars for Maine-grown fruit and vegetables (a more than 20 percent increase from 2019). Therefore in 2020 alone, Farm Fresh Rewards contributed to at least \$320,000 in Maine's local food economy.

While program growth provides an important source of support for local farms and Mainers who are struggling with food insecurity, this growth also comes with challenges. The federal funding that supports these programs requires matching contributions on a dollar-for-dollar basis. As participation in these programs grows, so does the need to secure matching funds from non-federal sources. Moreover, in order to continue to grow these programs and expand them to more rural parts of the state, additional financial support is needed for program administration and promotion to new customers. Relying primarily on federal grant cycles also puts these programs at risk of funding gaps that require them to limit, pause or cease operations.

The Fund established by LD 691 would create a consistent source of statewide funding that could help to bridge those gaps and enable the programs to grow and thrive, including expanding further in rural areas that need more administrative support. At the same time, because federal funding for these programs requires a dollar-for-dollar match, statewide funding would provide a critical source of matching funds and help bring more federal dollars into the state.

During the last Legislature, a private foundation offered to make a \$100,000 matching contribution to LD 691's predecessor legislation, with the aim of incentivizing a state appropriation to the Fund, if established. This contribution is no longer a possibility due to extensive pandemic-related grant-making on the part of this foundation. MFT and our Maine nutrition incentive partners would like to take 2021 to pursue other opportunities to establish a matching contribution from a foundation, creating the potential for a public-private partnership that could in turn leverage additional federal dollars, all in support of Maine's low-income families and local farm and food businesses. We would also like to see how the influx of federal stimulus funds to the state through the American Rescue Plan will impact the opportunity for the Fund to receive a state appropriation in 2022. For these reasons, we hope that you will support the request to carry over LD 691 to the 2022 legislative session.