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

IN SUPPORT OF LD 691

An Act to Support Farms and Address Food Insecurity

March 25, 2021

Senator Dill, Representative O’Neil, and honorable members of the Joint Standing Committee on Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry, my name is Leigh Hallett, and I am the Director of Agricultural Resource Development at the Bureau of Agriculture, Food, and Rural Resources within the Department of Agriculture, Conservation & Forestry. I’m speaking today in reference to LD 691, “An Act to Support Farms and Address Food Insecurity.” We thank Representative Pluecker for sponsoring this bill.

The Bureau of Agriculture, Food, and Rural Resources has several important constituencies. Chief among them is **farmers**, whom we serve with technical assistance, food safety resources, financial tools, grant programs, market development support, and more. And another is **low-income Mainers**. These are the people we serve with programs like Maine Senior FarmShare, the Emergency Food Assistance Program, Hunters for the Hungry, and others.

We see LD 691 as being about maintaining and supporting programs that are textbook “win-win” situations for these two important constituencies of the Department.

Programs exist both within private philanthropy and within the USDA that fund efforts to encourage people who use nutrition benefits like SNAP and WIC to spend their benefits on local fruits and vegetables. For over a decade, Maine organizations have been notably successful in leveraging these resources to create incentive programs like Farm Fresh Rewards, which incentivizes purchases at retail outlets, and Maine Harvest Bucks, which incentivizes purchases in direct-to-consumer settings like CSAs and farmers’ markets. In 2020, together, these programs generated \$845,000 in high-values sales for Maine farms.

The USDA supports programs like these via a grant program formerly known as the Food Insecurity Nutrition Incentive (FINI) grant program, now known as GusNIP. The federal program requires significant local match to access these funds, and those match requirements are rising and increasingly restrictive. A state commitment to provide some of the required matching

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funds would be a strategic way to protect an important and growing market for Maine producers while we simultaneously make healthy foods more accessible to low-income Maine families in a way that empowers them to choose foods best suited for themselves and/or their families.

In addition to the economic benefit for farmers and the health benefits for consumers, there is at least one more important reason to support initiatives that increase the consumption of local produce. The Maine Climate Action Plan, under Strategy D “Grow Maine’s Clean-Energy Economy and Protect Our Natural-Resource Industries,” includes action item D1.3: “Increase the amount of food consumed in Maine from state food producers from 10% to 20% by 2025 and 30% by 2030 through local food system development.” Right now, the overwhelming majority of food purchased with federal food benefits is is not local. In addition to its other positive impacts, we see LD 691 as providing a boost to the broader initiative to increase local food consumption, as well as enhance access to Maine grown foods through various market channels.

Thank you. I am happy to answer any questions at a work session in the future.