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Testimony introducing LD 691, “An Act To Support Farms and Address Food Insecurity”

Presented by Representative Bill Pluecker, House District 95. Presented to the Agriculture, Conservation & Forestry Committee, Thursday, March 25th, 2021.

Good morning Senator Dill, Representative O’Neil, and other distinguished members of the Agriculture, Conservation & Forestry Committee. I am Representative Bill Pluecker from Warren and I represent House District 95 which is Appleton, Hope, part of the town of Union, and Warren. Today, I am introducing LD 691, An Act To Support Farms and Address Food Insecurity. A close mirror image of this bill was introduced in the 129th Legislature, made it through this committee, the House, Senate and then eventually died as we left Augusta due to the health pandemic.

This is a bill that supports a program that we have been using on my farm for over a decade to support our community and build our business. In cooperation with MOFGA, Maine Organic Farmers and Gardeners Association, we provide a 50% discount to any SNAP beneficiaries who come to our farm to buy a CSA share. The funds to make this happen come from the federal government and are funneled through MOFGA to us, as the farmers, to match the funds that the SNAP beneficiaries pay to us for their vegetables. The difficulty lies in the administration of these grants and in fundraising the matching funds needed by MOFGA to qualify for the federal grants.

For every dollar that comes from the federal government, MOFGA must fundraise and match it. MOFGA can use very few of these funds for administration, and there are often lag times between the delivery of the funds from the federal government during which MOFGA must continue to administer the program. As we have seen during the health pandemic, the ability to fundraise funds for the food insecure cannot keep up with the demand upon the system. The

District 95: Appleton, Hope, (part) Union & Warren

purpose of this bill is to create a state fund that can help to ease the burden on non-profits like MOFGA so that we can keep these funds coming into the state for the benefit of farmers and the food insecure alike.

To be clear, my farm partners with MOFGA because they oversee the program for CSA's, like mine, but several other non-profits administer other aspects of the program in the state, like the Maine Federation of Farmer's Markets, Maine Farmland Trust, and others.

This year, these programs are partnered with the Federal FINI program, but next year the rules and administration of the program will undergo a relatively major change to the GUSNIP program. Nevertheless, the new program is largely intended to achieve the same goals as the original program, just with a new set of rules. If you would like details on the differences between the two programs, please ask for this information from some of those who are testifying after me.

While the original version of this bill was sitting on the appropriations table in 2020, in partnership with Maine Farmland Trust, we managed to secure the backing of a private foundation. This foundation was willing to match any funds that the state was able to put into the program. For every dollar the state invested, we doubled it with private dollars, which were doubled by federal dollars, which were then doubled again by SNAP beneficiary dollars. **For every dollar spent by the state, almost eight dollars ended up in farmer's sales to food insecure people.** The economic power of the program cannot be overstated.

Due to the health pandemic, that private foundation's backing is no longer available. We are also in doubt as to the ability of the state to find any extra dollars for a new program, even one as promising as this one. For this reason, we would like to hold this bill in committee until next session, so that we may continue to work with private foundations that are interested in this work, and with luck, find an appropriations table more adequately equipped to support new programming.

We have foundations that may be interested in supporting us again, depending on the economy, in the new year. We will also have a year to get the new federal GUSNIP program up and running in the state. We hope that we will have your support. at that time, to get this program, our farmers, and food insecure people the support they need in 2022.

Thank you for your time and attention.