



**Testimony of Ellen Stern Griswold, Policy and Research Director, Maine Farmland Trust,  
before the 130<sup>th</sup> Legislature's Joint Standing Committee on Agriculture, Conservation and  
Forestry**

**April 1, 2021**

Good morning Senator Dill, Representative O'Neil, and members of the Joint Standing Committee on Agriculture, Conservation, and Forestry. My name is Ellen Griswold, and I am testifying today on behalf of Maine Farmland Trust (MFT) in support of LD 870 – *Resolve, Directing the Permanent Commission on the Status of Racial, Indigenous and Maine Tribal Populations to Study the Impact of Policies Regarding Agriculture, Access to Land, Access to Grants and Access to Financing on African-American and Indigenous Farmers in the State.*

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, Farm Viability in the form of business planning and technical assistance to help farmers become and remain economically viable, and Public Outreach and Policy to grow the future of farming in Maine.

In September of 2019, MFT adopted a new five-year strategic plan to guide the organization in meeting the needs of Maine's farms, communities, and environment, while building upon the strong foundation we have developed over the last twenty plus years. One of the four pillars of that strategic plan is focused on equity and inclusion, because we know that in order to create lasting and positive change within Maine's food and farm systems, MFT needs to better understand the ways in which our work interfaces with issues of diversity, equity, and inclusion.

A critical first step in the process of creating meaningful action and change has been to invest in the education of our staff and board, and to build relationships with partners to help guide our evolution. For instance, we are participating in a diversity, equity and inclusion professional development project with many other Maine agricultural service providers, including the Department of Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry, that is funded through the USDA Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education (SARE) Program. Members of our staff and board are also participating in the First Light's Learning Journey – a year-long program that aims to build trust and relationship between conservation organizations and Maine Wabanaki tribes in order to expand indigenous access to land. Through First Light we are learning alongside over 100 other representatives from Maine's land trust and conservation organizations, all of whom are committed to learning how their organizations can better serve Maine's indigenous community and expand Wabanaki access and stewardship of land. MFT is committed to then apply these educational experiences to adjust our programming, governance, operations, and public messaging in ways that result in greater diversity, equity and inclusion.

Although these learning experiences have been instrumental first steps in building our awareness and understanding, it has also become clear how much more examination and reflection is needed to fully address the history of racism and discrimination within our country's agricultural and food system. LD 870 would greatly further this effort by creating a permanent commission to study the impacts of agricultural policies on farmers who are Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC), particularly as those policies relate to access to land and access to grants and financing. The Commission's findings report would then allow for the advancement of well-informed legislation and programmatic changes that will truly serve to create greater equity and access in agricultural programs, policies, and financial resources. For all of these reasons, MFT hopes that you will support LD 870 and ensure that in Maine we have a just, equitable, and inclusive farm and food system.