



HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

2 STATE HOUSE STATION
AUGUSTA, MAINE 04333-0002
(207) 287-1315

William D. Pluecker

State Representative
1133 Finntown Road
Warren, ME 04864
(207) 273-3044

Bill.Pluecker@legislature.maine.gov

Testimony introducing 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”

Presented by Representative Bill Pluecker, House District 95. Presented to the Agriculture, Conservation & Forestry Committee, Thursday, April 1st, 2021.

Good morning Senator Dill, Representative O’Neil, and other distinguished members of the Agriculture, Conservation & Forestry Committee. I am Representative Bill Pluecker and I represent House District 95 which is Appleton, Hope, part of the town of Union, and Warren. Thank you for the opportunity to present 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”.

In 1999, the USDA settled a class action court case filed on behalf of tens of thousands of African American farmers in the U.S. alleging discrimination in programming and loan access. The effects of this case have continued to play out in the intervening years as the USDA has attempted to come to terms with the ways that their policies inhibited access to African American farmers. The USDA has instituted policies that many of us are aware of, trying to provide fair resources to communities that they define as “socially disadvantaged.” It is time, as a state, and as an industry, that we look at how these same dynamics may have unfolded here.

We have an amazing tool for doing this kind of work in the State of Maine in the Permanent Commission on the Status of Racial, Indigenous, and Maine Tribal Populations. This is a group of industry and community leaders from the

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

communities that have been affected by our agricultural policies in Maine. They have a very valuable perspective on this conversation that we need to include in any conversation discussing race, and they have the necessary experience of analyzing bills, and policies, so that they can return to us with informed bill ideas.

In the US, there were 1 million Black farmers in 1920 but only 50,000 remain today. In Maine, we know there were more Black residents as a percentage of the population in the late 1800s than there are today. I think we can safely assume that many of those residents raised their own food for personal or commercial use based upon the way people in Maine lived at that time. We know some of the stories of disappeared Indigenous Black communities like Malaga, or in my own hometown of Warren, the disappearance of a village named Peterborough that existed for 150 years, had their own school, and died out in the 1940-50's. We can extrapolate from the stories of Peterborough and Malaga about the loss of land and business opportunities these communities faced. Tribal populations have faced a loss of access to agricultural land, especially blueberry land, and faced challenges working to build their businesses.

As a committee, we are committed to ensuring the strength and vibrance of Maine's agricultural sector. As farmers and committee members, we know the work and risk involved in any agricultural enterprise, and we are committed to getting bureaucracy and regulation out of the way of the growth of small agricultural businesses. This bill is exactly in line with that way of thinking. It is possible that our policies have held back the growth of some businesses. We need all agricultural entrepreneurs in this state who are willing to put in the heart and sweat that it takes to have a successful farm in Maine, for the strength of the state, and the health of our agricultural infrastructure.

The issue of race in agriculture involves history, and how it has built our present. It is complicated and involves policies that are difficult to analyze. This is why the expertise and knowledge of an organization like the Permanent Commission can be especially valuable. Having the opportunity to have the Permanent Commission do a thorough analysis and present a well-reasoned bill to our committee for review enables us to take informed, well researched, action that encourages agricultural enterprise that we need in the face of the growing challenges that all farmers face.