



# *Maine Organic Farmers and Gardeners Association*

## *Common Ground Country Fair*

April 1, 2021

Good morning Senator Dill, Representative O'Neil and members of the Committee on Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry. My name is Heather Spalding and I'm deputy director of the Maine Organic Farmers and Gardeners Association (MOFGA). I am submitting comments in support of the concept of LD 820 - *Resolve, To Convene a Working Group To Develop Plans To Protect Maine's Agricultural Lands When Siting Solar Arrays*. Senator Claxton's proposed resolve aligns with a title that Representative Berry submitted, and which relates to a bill from the past Legislature. We understand that the Department of Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry is just about ready to convene a stakeholders group so it's appropriate that this legislation be carried over to the next session when you may consider informed recommendations.

That being said, we enthusiastically support efforts to protect Maine farmland and keep it in agricultural production, while finding ways to reduce energy consumption and convert our fossil-fuel-based energy system to renewables. We know that MOFGA farmers already are feeling the pressure of hayfields being sacrificed to solar arrays. We recognize that renewable energy systems like 20-100 megawatt solar arrays take up a lot of space (100 to 500 acres) that could be used for other important climate challenges like wildlife habitat, and carbon sequestering fields and forests. MOFGA hopes that future projects will be assessed based not only on ratepayer benefits, but also on whether the projects avoid or minimize natural resource or agricultural impacts. We also hope that there will be incentives to help farmers afford to keep their land in agricultural production.

MOFGA has supported many legislative initiatives to reduce Maine's reliance on fossil fuels and to expand opportunities for a decentralized, ecologically friendly, renewable energy system that also provides financial benefits for farms and rural communities. We want to ensure responsible assessment of how solar arrays can be added to farm and open space tax programs, and the empowerment of the Department of Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry to take a leading role in ensuring that Maine's prime agricultural lands are protected for farming generations to come.

Governor Mills has set an ambitious and achievable goal for Maine to reduce Maine's Greenhouse Gas emissions by 45 percent below 1990 levels by 2030 and at least 80 percent by 2050. She has punctuated the plan seeking to achieve carbon neutrality by 2045. Responsible siting of solar arrays must figure prominently in our state's climate action plan – we must help farmers stay on their land, continue farming, diversify and strengthen their business plans, and protect the prime soils needed for a healthy Maine diet and a healthy climate. It is imperative to note that the farmland aspect of solar array siting should mesh with a clear plan to protect Maine's water resources statewide, Maine wildlife and native vegetation, and Maine's carbon sequestering forests.

MOFGA's vision for the next decade is to transform the way Mainers relate to their food. This vision includes farms that are helping mitigate climate change while making a good living that allows them to support their families and our communities. We are working to build a future where every Maine child, regardless of race, religion, gender identity, geography or socioeconomic status comes home to plenty of healthy local, organic food. This will only happen if Maine's agricultural sector is thriving economically, with healthy soils and renewable, affordable and appropriately located energy systems.

Thank you for your consideration of this important issue. I look forward to working on this with you in the next legislative session.

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## About MOFGA

*The Maine Organic Farmers and Gardeners Association (MOFGA) started in 1971 and is the oldest and largest state organic organization in the country. We're a broad-based community that educates about and advocates for organic agriculture, illuminating its interdependence with a healthy environment, local food production, and thriving communities. We have a staff of just under 50 employees, a membership of more than 10,000, and an amazing community of about 2500 volunteers, many of whom we rely on to host our annual Common Ground Country Fair.*

*Since our beginning we have advocated for policies that reduce all farmers' and homeowners' reliance on pesticides, and all citizens' exposures to pesticides in their diets and in the air and drinking water. We believe that the dramatic increases since the 1950s in childhood and adult cancer rates, as well as immune system and reproductive abnormalities, are directly related to the toxins that increasingly contaminate our environment and threaten the very existence of the pollinators on which our food systems rely.*

*MOFGA is a statewide organization that has experienced significant growth over the past couple of decades. By the year 2030, we aim to increase the number of certified organic growers from 550 to 750 and the amount of organically managed land from 7% to 10% of the state's agricultural land. We offer an introductory farm apprenticeship program, beginning farmer training through our two-year Journey person program, and a Farm Resilience Program for farmers in years 5-10 of their business when they're statistically the most likely to experience business failure. MOFGA Certification Services (MCS) is our USDA accredited organic certification program. MCS also administers MOFGA's Certified Clean Cannabis program for medicinal and adult cannabis use in Maine. MCS certifies more than 70,000 acres of farmland in Maine, representing more than \$60 million in organic farm product sales. MOFGA-certified operations are run by Maine businesspeople for whom economic health and environmental health are interdependent. While we envision a future of healthy ecosystems, communities, people and economies sustained by the practices of organic agriculture, we attribute our success to collaboration and outreach to growers across the management spectrum. We are members of the Agricultural Council of Maine and, while we don't always agree on all policy measures, we recognize and wholeheartedly agree that farmers must be financially successful if we expect to have a healthy Maine agriculture.*

*MOFGA looks forward to a day when highly toxic will not be regulated because they will cease to exist in agriculture, land management and building contexts. There are organic, mechanical, and biologic alternatives to most of the practices offered by industrial agribusiness.*