

TO: The Honorable Senator Dill  
The Honorable Representative O'Neil  
and the Committee on Agriculture, Conservation, and Forestry

DATE: 04/01/21

RE: Supporting LD 870, Resolve, Directing the Permanent Commission on the Status of Racial, Indigenous and Maine Tribal Populations To Study the Impact of Agricultural Policy, Land Access Structures, Grant Access Programs and Access to Financing on Dispossessed African-American and Indigenous Farmers in the State

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Good morning, Senator Dill, Representative O'Neil, and members of the Committee on Agriculture, Conservation, and Forestry. Thank you for the opportunity to testify today in support of LD 870. My name is Rachel Talbot Ross. I represent House District 40 in Portland. I sponsored the legislation that established the Permanent Commission on the Status of Racial, Indigenous, and Maine Tribal Populations, and I come before you today in my role as chair of the Permanent Commission.

The Permanent Commission is an independent entity with a mission to examine the racial disparities across Maine and specifically to work towards improving the status and outcomes for historically disadvantaged racial, indigenous, and Maine tribal populations. Moreover, we are empowered by the state to advise and consult all three branches of government.

I am here today to share the Commission's support for LD 870. The Permanent Commission was established to council Maine's governing bodies and examine the unique impacts of policy and programming on Maine's systemically underserved communities of color. The mandate of LD 870 falls squarely within this mission. Research into the impact of agricultural policy and management on African American and Indigenous farmers is desperately needed in Maine.

At its peak in the 1920s, [15%](#) of American farm owners were Black. By 2012, however, Black farmers shrunk to just 2%. This represents an [80%](#) loss in national Black farmland ownership, amounting to over [36 million acres](#) in lost land and [billions of dollars](#) in lost value. This process was the result of deliberate actions taken by local, state and federal agencies.

The USDA has a [well documented](#) history of discrimination against farmers of color, predominantly through denial of [access to credit and insurance](#). The scale of racial discrimination in American agriculture is perhaps best evidenced by the [Pigford Class Action Lawsuit](#) of 1999, in which the USDA was required to pay out over \$1 billion to more than 13,000 farmers of color who experienced racial discrimination.

Though the history of racial discrimination in agriculture is well documented at the national scale, little information exists on how Maine fits into the picture. LD 870 offers Maine the opportunity to examine its own place in history. The Permanent Commission was built for such studies. We are well poised to investigate this issue, report findings and, if necessary, present new legislation – rooted in data – to help uplift the African American and Indigenous farmers of our state.

We urge you to support LD 870, and I am happy to answer any questions you may have. Thank you for your consideration.