



# Maine Organic Farmers and Gardeners Association

## Common Ground Country Fair

April 29, 2021

Good morning Senator Dill, Representative O'Neil, and members of the Joint Standing Committee on Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry. My name is Heather Spalding and I am deputy director of the Maine Organic Farmers and Gardeners Association (MOFGA). MOFGA supports LD 1549 – *An Act to Establish the Maine Forest Advisory Board*.

Through education, training and advocacy, MOFGA is helping farmers thrive, making more local, organic food available and building sustainable communities. So why is MOFGA advocating on forest policies? LD 1549 is important to MOFGA for many reasons, but especially important because, while all of our members want Maine to have healthy forest ecosystems, most of our farmers and many of our members have woodlots that they wish to manage in the spirit of organic land management practices. For more than two decades we have run a Low Impact Forestry Program, which is a group of loggers, foresters, landowners, farmers and interested persons teaching, practicing and advocating for ecologically-based and economically-sound forest practices. We practice and endorse forestry that seeks to reduce the known harmful impacts of logging, and promote the social and ecological benefits of Low Impact Forestry. The program hosts workshops year-round covering all sorts of forestry-related topics and collaborates on logging projects that explore creative forest management and contracts that benefit both landowner and logger.

MOFGA appreciates that LD 1549 would organize a board in the spirit of many other Maine state entities such as the Marine Resources Advisory Council, which dates back to 1973. The Maine Forest Advisory Board would ensure that advice going to the Department of Forestry and other administrative departments would include input stakeholders with demonstrated interest in forest ecology. We hope that the level of discussion would evolve so that environmental health would garner as much, if not more, consideration as do short-rotation market interests.

LD 1549 would create an important forum for addressing the estimated loss of 10,000 acres of forestland each year. As we know from Governor Mills' climate report, *Maine Won't Wait*, Maine's forests are not only an essential component of our state economy, generating more than \$8 billion from forest products and \$2.8 billion from recreational activities annually, they are of global importance in protecting biodiversity. Our forests offer the habitat connectivity and varied topography that allow species to move and adapt to rising temperatures. Maine's 17.5 million acres of forests absorb 60% of our carbon pollution annually and we must ensure that the forest ecosystem is managed properly to meet the goal of carbon neutrality by 2045.

Mainers are fortunate to have great access to the citizen legislature and we appreciate the opportunity to discuss agriculture, conservation and forestry issues here with this honorable committee. We feel that a Maine Forest Advisory Board would provide an important complement to this legislative forum, allowing informed stakeholders with a broad range of expertise and opinions to help administrative departments prioritize projects, resource allocations, and rulemaking as those activities relate to forestry. The spectrum of interests that this bill includes would help educate Maine citizens about the challenges facing our forest health and economy.

I hope you will support this bill so that Maine can broaden its awareness of the critical role that forests play in the health of our environment and our economy. I serve on the Natural and Working Lands Working Group of Maine's Climate Council, which has prioritized an ambitious list of goals for supporting our forest ecosystem and economy. There is an incredible amount of work to be done and we're just getting started. Goals include:

- Develop and enhance innovation support, incentives, building codes, and marketing programs to increase the use of efficient and climate friendly Maine forest products, including mass timber and wood fiber insulation.
- Analyze policies, including the potential for long-term contracts, needed to advance new highly efficient combined heat and power production facilities that achieve significant net greenhouse gas reductions.
- Grow Maine's forest-products industry through bioproduct innovation, supporting economic growth and sustainable forest management and preservation of working lands.

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- Establish the University of Maine as the coordinating hub for state-applied research on forestry, agriculture, and natural land-related climate concerns, including research and development of climate-friendly bio-based wood-market innovation; and research around climate-friendly agricultural practices.
- Increase by 2030, the total acreage of conserved lands in the state to 30% through voluntary, focused purchases of land and working forest or farm conservation easements.
- Focus conservation on high biodiversity areas to support land and water connectivity and ecosystem health.
- Revise scoring criteria for state conservation funding to incorporate climate mitigation and resiliency goals.
- Develop policies by 2022 to ensure renewable energy project siting is streamlined and transparent while seeking to minimize impacts on natural and working lands and engaging key stakeholders.
- Maine DEP will conduct a comprehensive, state-wide inventory of carbon stocks on land and in coastal areas (including blue carbon) by 2023 to provide baseline estimates for state carbon sequestration, allowing monitoring of sequestration over time to meet the state's carbon neutrality goal.
- Establish by 2021, a stakeholder process to develop a voluntary, incentive-based forest carbon program (practice and/or inventory based) for woodland owners of 10 to 10,000 acres and forest practitioners.
- Engage in regional discussions to consider multi-state carbon programs that could support Maine's working lands and natural resource industries, and state carbon neutrality goals.
- Increase the amount of financial incentives available for climate friendly land management practices that sequester carbon and support climate change resilience.
- Update the Open Space Current Use Taxation Program and maintain the Tree Growth Tax Law
- Increase technical service provider capacity by 2024 to deliver data, expert guidance, and support for climate solutions to communities, landowners, farmers, loggers, and foresters at DACF, DIF&W, DMR, and the University of Maine.
- Provide state leadership for robust technical assistance and funding to communities by 2024 to support local and regional climate resilience initiatives.

A Maine Forest Advisory Board would be so helpful as we work to meet the goals of Maine's Climate Action Plan. The Maine Forest Advisory Board is distinct and complementary to the Natural and Working Lands Working Group of the Maine Climate Council as the Advisory Board would be lasting and would specifically advise the Maine Forest Service at the full suite of agency's work - not just climate-related matters.

Maine's Board of Pesticides Control (BPC) is an example of an advisory board that hosts regular public meetings and is structured to include diverse perspectives in decision making and prioritizing. The range of opinions will be broadened even further with passage of another bill under consideration by this Committee. Though MOFGA often has divergent opinions about BPC policies and decisions, we greatly appreciate the opportunity to attend meetings and provide input. We have attended nearly every meeting since the Board's inception.

This week, the National Organic Standards Board is holding its Spring meeting online. It is a great example of how an advisory board can work to ensure that administrative departments are held accountable to existing law. In this case, the NOSB works to provide recommendations to the USDA's National Organic Program staff to ensure that practices comply with the Organic Food Production Act. The board members represent a broad range of interests across the country and regularly host public meetings with input from hundreds, sometimes thousands, of stakeholders. This is a democratic process that promotes a thriving organic farming sector while ensuring that human health and environment do not take back seats to market interests.

At least 15 other states have established forest advisory boards. We hope you will support this bill so that Maine can broaden its awareness of the critical role that forests play in the health of our environment and so that we can work collaboratively to develop a thriving and sustainable forest economy.

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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.*