



Maine Organic Farmers and Gardeners Association

Common Ground Country Fair

May 4, 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'm deputy director of the Maine Organic Farmers and Gardeners Association (MOFGA). I am submitting comments in support of LD 1565 - *An Act To Strengthen Maine's Agriculture, Food and Forest Economy*. We are happy that this bill has come back to your attention after having received unanimous support from this committee in the last Legislature before COVID derailed its progress.

MOFGA is creating a food system that is healthy and fair for all of us. Through education, training and advocacy, we're helping farmers thrive, making more local, organic food available and building sustainable communities. 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. LD 1565 would be very helpful to our goals.

This bill would establish an investment fund to support Maine's working lands industries so that producers, processors and other food businesses can better anticipate and access new markets and opportunities. A fund advisory board would represent diverse experience relevant to farming, food manufacturing and culture, and would prioritize technical assistance for underserved communities. LD 1565 calls for supporting growth and innovation in critical infrastructure businesses across the value chain. It creates an industry "roadmap" by directing the Department of Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry (DACF) and the Department of Economic Cooperation and Development (DECD) to establish a statewide system for growing Maine's food system.

COVID-19 has underscored both the fragility of Maine's food system and the resiliency and innovation of our farmers, food processors, distributors, retailers and food security organizations. The disruption to markets due to COVID created a growing interest in farmers diversifying into value-added products to increase the stability of their businesses. Many were able to develop more products for their remaining or new markets (there were lots of new farm stands) by adding commercial kitchens on farm, by working with co-packers or incubator kitchens, and by buying in more value-added Maine products from other farms/businesses. Many of our farmers also began to market their products cooperatively and directly to consumers, requiring aggregation and distribution infrastructure.

There is a great need for improved infrastructure for the dairy sector, both on-farm and at the processing level. The most recent Census of Agriculture showed that Maine's dairy farms have declined from 4,578 total dairy farms in 1954 to 286 by 2017. This loss of dairy farms has serious adverse impacts on the broader agricultural sector and we need to do everything we can to reverse the trend of closing dairy farms. LD 1565 would provide much needed support for the dairy farmers hanging on and working to ensure profitability for small and mid-size dairy farms. There is a need for expanding dairy processing capacity, especially for value-added products and in closer proximity to where the milk is produced. MOO Milk (Maine's Own Organic Milk company) made a valiant effort to fill that need but antiquated infrastructure stymied progress and it had to close.

Several of our livestock farms are venturing into on-farm butchery and expanding those operations as access to licensed slaughterhouses in Maine dwindling. Farms are making infrastructure improvements but they report that accessing financial capital through financing or grants is very burdensome and challenging, so many farms are not able to make these improvements, or would make more improvement if funding were available.

Over the past year, on-line ordering, payment and pick-up scheduling has become common for most direct-to-consumer farms and also is being used by some wholesale markets. Broadband access is a clear need for successful Maine farm businesses as you have heard many times during this legislative session.

MOFGA's staff members work closely with our certified organic farmers and hear recurring calls for broadband access and online marketing resources, on-farm processing facilities to produce value-added products, improved transportation and distribution systems to support remote farm businesses participation in dense market areas, and, probably most frequently, on-farm infrastructure that is compliant with the Food Safety Modernization Act (FSMA). Through a Specialty Crop Block Grant awarded to MOFGA we established the Maine Food Safety Improvement Grant pilot through which we awarded \$50k to 11 farmers. Most farmers are using the award to make improvements to their wash, pack and food storage infrastructure to comply with the FSMA produce safety rule and to meet market demands for food safety. The application pool requested nearly \$100k and we feel that there would have been much more demand except that farmers were so overwhelmed with the number of program/emergency grant applications that were open at the time. Our program is modelled after Vermont's program that has been in effect since 2018 and awarded over \$300k to 47 farms.

Many MOFGA farmers engage in technical support programs administered by the USDA and the DAF. Examples are the Natural Resources Conservation Service EQIP program which helps farmers transition to organic management practices and embrace conservation practices. Our farmers participate in Maine's Farms for the Future program, and Maine Farmland Trust's Business of Farming and Farming for Wholesale courses. We host a Farm Beginnings and Maine Farm Resilience Program, and we collaborate with the Wild Blueberry Commission on Fresh-pack and Value-Added Committee projects. Participants in these programs would experience a multiplier effect from infrastructure projects arising from LD 1599.

Leah Cook, Food Inspection Supervisor at the DAF, stated that, "in Maine we have a lot of educational programs and technical services available to farmers to help them grow their farms, but lack the direct funding opportunities needed to really support that growth - we need that complementary pair of available capital and business planning/technical services to really make an impact."

MOFGA's staff members have spent a great deal of time over the past couple of years educating ourselves about the roots and challenges of racial inequity in agricultural policies. We recognize that modern agriculture is built on unceded traditional Indigenous lands through human exploitation and co-opted knowledge, and, as a white-led organization, we want to be explicit and transparent about how we are working towards our commitments to social justice. We believe in economic, environmental and social justice for all people involved in Maine's food system, including those most impacted by historic and present-day systemic oppression including white supremacy, colonization and extractive capitalism. We appreciate that LD 1565 is informed by the goals of Massachusetts' Food Food Trust Program, which meets the financing needs of healthy food retailers and distributors that plan to operate in underserved communities where costs and credit needs cannot be filled solely by conventional financing institutions.

This bill aligns with established and ongoing Maine initiatives including:

- Maine's Economic Development Strategy 2020-2029: A Focus on Talent and Innovation (to ensure robust, climate-safe food supply chain, foster talent and innovation in food manufacturing, marine systems and the biobased economy).
- Governor's Economic Recovery Committee Recommendations to Sustain & Grow Maine's Economy (Nov. 2020)

- Maine Climate Action Plan (statutory objectives, to reduce carbon emissions and build local and regional food systems)
- Maine's role in Food Solutions New England's A New England Food Vision (USDA funded regional food system, supply chain resilience)
- Maine Food Cluster Project findings, highlighted in Growing Maine's Food Industry, Growing Maine

We also appreciate that this bill calls for cross department collaboration between the DACF, and the DECD to Maine's farm viability into the future.

Finally, we note that this bill would dovetail with *LD 1475, An Act To Authorize a General Fund Bond Issue for Targeted Food Processing Infrastructure*, which would secure \$5 million in funding to support critical infrastructure for targeted and appropriately scaled food processing projects including meat and poultry processing, specialty grain milling, malting and storage facilities, cheesemaking equipment and storage, and organic dairy processing infrastructure. We know that passage of LD 1475 is uncertain but it does align with goals specifically laid out in Governor Mills' four-year climate action plan, which calls for a significant increase in the amount of Maine-produced and –consumed food – 30% by 2030. We're at 8% now.

We need infrastructure, innovation, involvement of stakeholders and informed decision-making. Thank you for your consideration of this bill. We urge you to vote ought to pass.

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 Journeyperson 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.