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*Testimony of Assistant House Majority Leader Rachel Talbot Ross presenting*

**LD 1565, An Act to Strengthen Maine's Agriculture, Food and Forest Economy**

*Before the Joint Standing Committee on Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry*

Senator Dill, Representative O'Neil and distinguished members of the Joint Standing Committee on Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry, my name is Rachel Talbot Ross. I represent House District 40. Thank you for the opportunity to present **LD 1565, An Act to Strengthen Maine's Agriculture, Food and Forest Economy**.

At its core, this bill is about economic development – specifically in the form of equitable investment in our food system. That includes critical infrastructure to ensure a climate- and pandemic-resilient food supply, which will also support good jobs and stronger communities right here in Maine.

The COVID-19 pandemic has revealed the vulnerability in our global food system. It has also exposed the value of the opportunity before us: to learn from the food supply chain disruption we all experienced firsthand over the past year and support those who are growing and producing food here. If we seize the current moment by investing in the future of Maine's food system, we can put more Maine-produced foods on plates in-state and beyond – by literally capitalizing on our state's reputation for and ability to produce and add value to pristine, quality food.

Returning members of the committee may recall the earlier iteration of this measure from the 129<sup>th</sup> Legislature. That bill earned unanimous support from the committee and was headed for a floor vote when we unexpectedly adjourned due to the pandemic. The need for this proposal was reinforced by focus groups convened by a group of stakeholders, which centered on the needs and challenges facing Maine's agricultural sector. You will hear from many of those stakeholders today.

I have learned through my entry into the world of farming and value-added food production that financing, be it for land, operating capital or facility space, is inaccessible to most farmers and food businesses. Beyond that, the accessibility is inequitable. Business owners and entrepreneurs from disadvantaged backgrounds or historically marginalized population groups are just not able to bootstrap the American entrepreneurial dream without access to capital.

LD 1565 offers a solution to fill the capital gap for Maine's food industry. It draws on Vermont's Farm-to-Plate initiative and the Vermont Working Lands Enterprise Fund, which supports businesses building and modernizing critical processing infrastructure in order to fill gaps in the local supply chain. Vermont's model brings both the agricultural and economic development communities together to support the industry, and it has been incredibly successful. Between 2012 and 2018, Vermont invested \$7 million in 241 projects across every county in the state, leveraging \$11 million in private and matching funds and creating hundreds of jobs.

You will likely hear about Massachusetts's model today as well. Each of our New England neighbors has some form of state investment in its food system. We have the potential to be a leader in these efforts to build regional supply chain capacity and resilience. As a state, we have recognized and highlighted the opportunity before us, including in the [Maine Economic Development Strategy, 2020-2029: A Focus on Talent and Innovation](#) and Maine's Climate Action Plan, [Maine Won't Wait: A Four-Year Plan for Climate Action \(2020\)](#).

Now it is time to act, and LD 1565 gives us the tools we need to realize this potential.

First, it establishes the Maine Agriculture, Food and Forest Products Investment Fund to facilitate strategic, targeted investments in these industries. This fund could be capitalized with bond funds, such as the measure I have proposed in LD 1475, An Act To Authorize a General Fund Bond Issue for Targeted Food Processing Infrastructure, or through some other mechanism. I look forward to working with the committee to determine the best path forward.

LD 1565 also establishes an advisory board, which will represent a diversity of skills and backgrounds relevant to our food system and our agricultural and forest products industries. The board will oversee the fund, implement related technical assistance programs and report to the Legislature on its work.

Finally, the bill promotes collaboration and public-private partnership by bringing stakeholders together to strengthen these industries and invest in the future.

While we see Maine farms and food producers are local or regional businesses, they all compete in the global economy. These enterprises rely on access to capital and extensive infrastructure. In other words, the system we envision will not happen spontaneously. It will take intention and the kind of action proposed in LD 1565.

Some of Maine's foremost leaders in supporting and innovating around our agricultural and forest products sectors are here today to speak to how the benefits of this bill would ripple throughout our state economy. They can also speak to the complexities of competing in a global economy. That said, I would be happy to answer any questions you may have for me.

Thank you for your consideration.