



Committee on Agriculture, Conservation, and Forestry
c/o Legislative Information Office
100 State House Station
Augusta, ME 04333

March 1, 2022

Testimony in support of LD 856 - An Act To Balance Renewable Energy Development with Natural and Working Lands Conservation

Senator Dill, Representative O'Neil, and other Members of the Committee on Agriculture, Conservation, and Forestry:

Thank you for the opportunity to speak in support of LD 856, An Act To Balance Renewable Energy Development with Natural and Working Lands Conservation as amended by Representative Berry on February 24, 2022, on behalf of American Farmland Trust.

AFT is a national leader in protecting farmland and advancing environmentally sound farming practices including advancing Smart Solar Siting on farmland to support clean energy capacity while also protecting production on our best farmland. AFT has a long history working in Maine, stemming back to our role supporting the first farmland protection projects undertaken through the Land for Maine's Future program. More recently, AFT was a member of the Agricultural Solar Stakeholder Group convened by the Governor's Energy Office (GEO) and the Department of Agricultural, Conservation, and Forestry (DACF).

AFT supports this legislation, as amended by Representative Berry, as it advances key recommendations of the Agricultural Solar Stakeholder Group, including planning the creation of dual-use pilot program, creating a centralized database of energy projects and their key characteristics, and the increasing participation of agricultural stakeholders in solar energy working groups. All key steps towards a more balanced and transparent solar energy future in Maine.

As Maine moves to capture the environmental, economic, and energy benefits of clean, renewable energy, we must also minimize impacts on Maine's agriculture by protecting production on the State's best farmland. Well-sited and thoughtfully designed dual-use solar energy installations provide an opportunity to simultaneously protect farmland, advance clean energy generation, and support farmers through income diversification.

AFT encourages a more substantial allocation of generating capacity - at least 50 MWac for a dual use pilot program. Building on lessons learned with the Dual Use Solar program in Massachusetts, and with other states such as NJ and NY exploring agrivoltaic pilot programs and incubator initiatives, this is the right time for Maine to be at the forefront of clean energy innovations that directly support Maine's farmers.

A robust dual-use pilot program provides the opportunity to conduct research on production systems and projects designs that are most compatible within Maine's agricultural landscape and economy. Dual-use solar installations have been reported to improve importance soil metrics on site, including:

- Increased moisture retention in soil and plants in times of high heat and low precipitation
- Increases in pasture grass biomass under arrays during summer months as compared to areas in full-sun
- Reduced heat-stress in livestock by providing added shade in summer
- Increased yields for some vegetables under dual-use arrays (including potatoes, celery, kale, and others)

While dual-use solar installation and crop production compatibility is often cited as a cause for concern, a dual-use pilot program that collects and evaluates Maine-specific crop, soil, and climate impact data, is key to addressing such concerns.

Since 2013 farmers have been facing nearly a 50% drop in net farm income over the last 8 years and continue to face increases in farm production expenses. This economic crisis has had serious impacts on farm viability, farmer well-being, and thus threatens farmland security. As climate impacts ravage growing seasons, and with the recent, devastating discovery of forever chemicals like PFAS contaminating our regions' soils, the livelihood of Maine's farmers has never been at greater risk. Dual-use solar installations can provide income diversification and improved income stability, leading to increased viability, security, and farmland protection. It is imperative that agricultural stakeholders are represented in solar policy and program development conversations, including participating in the GEO's distributed generation working group.

LD856, as amended by Representative Berry, provides mechanisms that support the State of Maine's renewable energy goals, increase agricultural representation during solar policy conversations, and increase solar energy project data transparency to better understand the potential impact that solar energy has on Maine's farmland and Maine's family farms.

Thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony and for your consideration of these comments.

With respect,



Emily J Cole, PhD
New England Deputy Director