



MAINE FARMLAND TRUST

**Testimony of Ellen Stern Griswold, Policy and Research Director, Maine Farmland Trust,
before the 130th Legislature's Joint Standing Committee on Agriculture, Conservation and
Forestry**

March 1, 2022

Good afternoon Senator Dill, Representative O'Neil, and members of the Joint Standing Committee on Agriculture, Conservation, and Forestry. My name is Ellen Griswold, and I am testifying today on behalf of Maine Farmland Trust (MFT) in support of the amendment proposed for LD 856 – *An Act To Balance Renewable Energy Development with Natural and Working Lands Conservation*.

MFT is a member-powered statewide organization that works to protect farmland, support farmers, and advance the future of farming. Since our founding in 1999, MFT has helped to permanently protect nearly 300 farms and keep over 60,000 acres of farmland in farming, while supporting over 800 farm families with a range of services. Our four main program areas are Farmland Protection, Farmland Access, Farm Viability in the form of business planning and technical assistance to help farmers become and remain economically viable, and Public Outreach and Policy to grow the future of farming in Maine. Protecting farmland in Maine is a principal part of our mission because we believe it is essential for ensuring that we have the land base to grow our agricultural economy, particularly as more farmers reach retirement age and development pressures increase across the state. Protecting land is also a key natural climate solution by avoiding the greater emissions associated with developed land, by ensuring we have the farmland needed to support our local and regional food economy and create food security for our state, and by preserving the climate benefits that can result from farmers using climate-friendly practices on the land.

Maine's farmland is a precious and limited resource. According to the last USDA Census of Agriculture report, between 2012 and 2017 Maine lost 10% of its farmland – that is over 145,000 acres of pastureland, cropland, and woodland.¹ This loss of farmland is troubling because farms provide many critical state and community benefits. Agriculture in Maine contributes over \$3.6 billion in economic impact and supports over 27,000 jobs statewide according to an analysis by Farm Credit East.² Governor Mills' 10-year economic development strategy identifies the food sector in Maine, and the sectors that support it like farming, as one

¹ In 2012, Maine had 1,454,104 acres in farmland, but by 2017 that number had dropped to 1,307,566 acres – a loss of 146,491 acres or 10% of Maine's farmland. United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), National Agricultural Statistics Service (NASS), *U.S. Census of Agriculture for 2017*, Maine, https://www.nass.usda.gov/Publications/AgCensus/2017/Full_Report/Volume_1,_Chapter_1_State_Level/Maine/mev1.pdf.

² Farm Credit East, "Northeast Economic Engine: Agriculture, Forest Products and Commercial Fishing," (2020), available at: <https://www.farmcrediteast.com/knowledge-exchange/Reports/2020%20Northeast%20Economic%20Engine>.

of the four areas most ripe for economic development because of the state's current strengths, the growing global demand, and the potential for job creation.³ Farms also provide many important benefits to the communities and regions in which they are located, including the availability of local food and farm products, pastoral beauty, recreational access and enjoyment, as well as other environmental and educational benefits.⁴

MFT supports renewable energy production on farms as long as it does not significantly diminish the potential for agricultural production. On-site energy production can provide economic support to a farm, reduce the farm's energy costs, and is important for addressing climate change. But making sure we have the land base to support a robust local and regional food system – and food security in Maine – is also critical. As renewable energy development has increased in the state, so too has our understanding of the impacts that these projects can have on the amount of farmland taken out of agricultural production, the loss of important agricultural soils, and the competition for land that farmers need to lease in order to support their operations. MFT believes that solar generation and agriculture can co-exist symbiotically in Maine as long as solar siting is structured to balance these important interests.

Because of this belief, MFT was thrilled to participate in the Agricultural Solar Siting Stakeholder Group that was created by LD 820 and convened by the Maine Department of Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry (DACF) and the Governor's Energy Office (GEO) to develop consensus recommendations to incentivize the siting of solar energy projects that minimize impacts to valuable agricultural lands. LD 856 as amended would advance key Stakeholder Group recommendations for supporting balanced solar development.

First, the legislation would create the opportunity to investigate the potential of dual-use solar projects in Maine by reserving at least 20 MW of capacity for a dual-use pilot program, focused on the integration of solar projects with agricultural production systems. This pilot program would allow for the establishment of a sufficient number of dual-use projects of varying sizes, in different locations, and involving different types of agriculture. In doing so, the pilot would allow DACF and its partners to collect data and determine how these projects affect agricultural production, and what kinds of benefits, costs, and support needs are associated with this type of development. The collection of this data is critical for determining whether and how this could be a viable model for solar production in the state.

Second, the amendment would ensure that agricultural and natural resource stakeholders are involved in the siting work sessions of the Distributed Generation Stakeholder Group, which was established in 2021 by LD 936 and is being convened by GEO. The inclusion of these stakeholders is needed so that impacts to important agricultural and natural resources are considered, and that well-sited projects, which could include solar development on land with significant PFAS contamination or on previously-developed land, are prioritized and supported in renewable energy programs. Both the Agricultural Solar Siting Stakeholder Group and DACF recommended in their LD 820 reports that agricultural and natural resource stakeholders be a part of those siting conversations. LD 856 provides the structure for that inclusion and ensures

³ *Maine Economic Development Strategy (2020-2029): A Focus on Talent and Innovation* (2019) at 14, available at: https://www.maine.gov/decd/sites/maine.gov.decd/files/inlinefiles/DECD_120919_sm.pdf.

⁴ Bunker, Amanda, et al. (2011). *Cultivating Maine's Agricultural Future: A Guide for Towns, Land Trusts, and Farm Supporters*. Maine Farmland Trust, American Farmland Trust & Mainewatch Institute, available at <https://www.maineFarmlandtrust.org/public-outreach-new/public-policy/municipal-policy/>.

that enough time is provided for meaningful discussion and the creation of policy tool recommendations to guide solar development away from valuable agricultural resources.

Third, the legislation would provide DACF with the staffing and resources it needs to be able to assist with solar policy development in the state, including analyzing land use impacts, supporting the design and establishment of the dual-use pilot program, and providing technical assistance to municipalities as they work to evaluate solar projects. Providing DACF with adequate resources is critical for ensuring balanced solar siting in the state.

Finally, the amendment would provide GEO with the resources it needs to create a publicly-accessible database of key characteristics of fully permitted or constructed energy projects so that land use trends can be identified and strategies can be created to avoid the over-development of important resources.

For all of these reasons, MFT hopes that you will support the amendment to LD 856 and ensure that renewable energy generation and agriculture co-exist in Maine in a mutually beneficial manner.