



MOFGA Comments Regarding
LD 220 - *An Act to Support Maine's Potato Farmers and Processors*

April 19, 2023

Dear Senator Ingwersen, Representative Pluecker 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). I'm sorry that I can't be there this morning for the work session on LD 220 – *An Act to Support Maine's Potato Farmers and Processors*. I wanted to share some thoughts from MOFGA regarding the proposed amendment to LD 220 appropriating \$3 million to the Potato Marketing Improvement Fund for grants to potato farmers for sustainable irrigation water sources that meet the requirements of the Department of Environmental Protection rules relating to in-stream flows and lake and pond water levels.

MOFGA has 139 producers who have certified organic potatoes. For some it might be a very small amount of their overall vegetable production. I could get acreage for you but for now it's worth noting that about a third of our certified organic farms grow and sell potatoes.

For seed potatoes, we have 10 certified organic operations. Three are handlers only, including: Maine Potato Lady, Johnny's Selected Seeds, and Fedco. Certified organic farms producing and selling seed potatoes include Wood Prairie Farm in Bridgewater, Nature's Circle in New Limerick, Thibodeau Homestead in Caribou, Orange Circle Farm in Berwick, M. Dionne Farm in Grand Isle, and Misty Meadows Farm, also in Grand Isle. MOFGA also provides organic certification for Stonewall Farm in Nottingham, NH but they wouldn't benefit from this law.

MOFGA farmers of all crops and livestock would be very happy to have additional support for addressing the challenges of drought and dramatically shifting weather patterns. The University of Maine's 2020 Maine Agriculture and Drought Report indicated that nearly 70% of farmers intended to invest in irrigation in the near future, but more than half stated that they did not have the financial resources needed for those investments. We know that blueberry farmers have been disproportionately impacted by drought. We have reports of blueberry growers with multiple years of zero harvest due to drought which has led to loss of crop insurance through USDA.

We are pleased that Governor Mills included \$2 million plus \$300,000 annually in her budget for drought relief for farmers. We know that it is a small but important amount and that the demands exceed this starting fund. We appreciate Representative Guerrette's initiative in asking for additional funding but we feel that it should be an even larger number, not have earmarks for a particular sector, and be managed by the Department of Agriculture,



Conservation and Forestry (DACF) so that it can be disbursed to the farmers with the greatest need.

As you know, MOFGA is not opposed to sector-specific funding when urgent. We have spent many hours in this committee and before the Appropriations and Financial Affairs Committee advocating for emergency relief for dairy farmers who are falling out of businesses at a rapid rate. The past two years have been good for potato growers, with 2021 and 2022 near record in Aroostook County. Prices have been high for seed potatoes and bad weather out west is driving demand for Maine's potatoes. Process growers got a 20% increase each year for 2021 and 2022. Table stock prices are 30% higher than a year ago.

We can't tell what the 2023 growing season brings but we feel that the DACF should have discretion to assist the farmers most in need. DACF has contracted with the University of Maine to conduct outreach to farmers across the state to determine the best way to set up the drought relief program and disburse funds. Just as we await recommendations of the PFAS Fund Advisory Committee to determine how \$60 million in relief should be allocated for direct support for farmers, we should ensure that the ongoing work of the University informs this legislation and the budget process.

We recognize that the Wild Blueberry Commission last week suggested an additional \$10 million in SFY24 to be shared among sectors other than potatoes, and today is suggesting lowering that number to \$3 million. If a \$6 million total is acceptable to the Committee, we would support that but would hope that it would be without sector earmarks and managed by the DACF.

Thank you very much for your consideration.

Respectfully,

Heather Spalding
Deputy Director & Senior Policy Director

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 15,000 members, we certify more than 500 organic farms and processing facilities representing \$90 million in sales, and we are working hard to provide training and create opportunities for Maine's next generation of farmers. Each of these farmers is a Maine businessperson for whom economic health and environmental health are interdependent. While MOFGA envisions 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.