

To: Committee on Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry

From: Lucie Nolden

Date: 03.14.2023

Re: Testimony in FAVOR of LD 901; Resolve, to Establish a Pilot Project to Support Farm Apprenticeships in Maine

Senator Ingwerson, Representative Pluecker, and the honorable members of the Committee on Agriculture, Conservation, and Forestry, my name is Lucie Nolden. I live in Tremont, Maine and I am writing in favor of L.D. 901.

I wrote this bill with the help of friends and mentors like Jo Burdett because I saw a problem, a big one, and I saw a solution for the problem. For many decades federal subsidies have supported the industrialization and delocalization of agriculture. Farms have gotten much larger, and fewer and fewer people are farmers. The average age of farmers has been rising, our food has gotten more and more processed and is grown further and further away, and not only have we gotten more and more disconnected from the food we eat, but our food system has become more and more vulnerable to collapse. With inflation and rising fuel prices, food is more expensive than ever. As a state, Maine imports 90% of the food we eat, even though farmers in the state produce more than enough calories to feed all Mainers. This becomes an even bigger problem as fuel prices continue to rise and climate change threatens the breadbaskets of the country and of the world. What will we do if a major drought hits the west and fuel prices remain high? How will Mainers afford food and where will it come from?

A strong and resilient state economy starts with a diverse and well-supported network of local producers. Farming in Maine has a rich history, and we can proudly say we have plenty of innovative farmers and producers leading the way, in both the state and in the country, towards this vision. Visionaries in four season farming, no-till farming, and local grain economies have blazed paths forward here in Maine. And hundreds of incredible farmers, like my mentors Jo and Jarrett at Moodytown, have made it their mission to produce healthy and delicious food for their communities while doing so in a sustainable way, a way that can be practiced for decades or centuries without depleting the soil of essential nutrients or diminishing biodiversity. These farmers, with their many combined years of experience, are feeding Maine. And we need to support them in transferring their wisdom to the next generation of farmers.

Through decently paid work with an emphasis on training, farm apprentices can and have been learning how to put carbon back into the soil, bring heritage species of fruits and vegetables, grains, and animals back into the fold, and support local food systems. But it is important that these apprentices should receive a fair wage for their hard labor, which is often physically difficult, but can also be cognitively challenging. Farm work is perhaps the most underappreciated and undercompensated form of labor, and as a society we have sort of accepted

that farm work must require working extremely long hours, every day, for very low pay. Agricultural workers are one of the few exemptions from Maine's state minimum wage. It is insane to me that we continue to accept this status quo as normal. We cannot survive without farmers, and yet we continue to underappreciate the work they do.

I see this bill as an opportunity to envision a different way that our local food economies could look, nationally and statewide. This is a pilot program to test out what could happen if we give farmers and farm workers the resources they need to not just survive, but thrive. We can keep it small, test it out, and fix any kinks. Maine is already a leader in strong local food economies, and with this bill, we can become trailblazers, striking a path forwards for the nation to follow.

I wrote this bill largely by myself, and I've never written a bill before. I am literally 22 years old. I had the help of several amazing people who offered their advice and expertise to help shape the language, but I don't think this version has to be the final form. I would like to hear discussion and debate around sections like the housing requirement, data collection for review of the pilot program, and the requirements for farm eligibility. It would be incredible if this bill passed, but it would also be amazing if this bill sparked a conversation about creative, out-of-the-box ways we can support a more resilient and strong local foods economy.