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Testimony of Representative Laurie Osher in support of
**LD 901: Resolve, to Establish a Pilot Project to Support Farm
Apprenticeships in Maine**

Before the Joint Standing Committee on Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry

Senator Ingwersen, Representative Pluecker, and fellow members of the Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry Committee. I am Laurie Osher and I represent District 25, the majority of Orono. Thank you for providing me the opportunity to introduce and express my support for **LD 901: Resolve, to Establish a Pilot Project to Support Farm Apprenticeships in Maine.**

There are approximately 7,600 farms across Maine. Median farm size is 67 acres and the majority of farms are operated by sole proprietors on less than fifty acres. The average age of Maine farmers is 57 years old, and is increasing each year. From the most recent (2017) Maine Ag Census, we know that the number of farmers age 65 and older increased by 30 %, signaling an urgent need for succession and retirement planning. One way to assist with succession planning is for farmers to train apprentices. This bill proposes a pilot project to support farm apprenticeships in Maine.

For people interested in becoming farmers, working as seasonal farmworkers is a good first step. The next step in workforce training in other fields is an apprenticeship program. The Maine Organic Farmers and Gardeners Association has an apprenticeship program that is not associated with any state or federal government program. Their website describes the program this way:

“MOFGA’s Apprenticeship Program is targeted for young adults, with or without previous farming experience, but all are welcome to apply. Apprenticeships may begin any time during the year, and last for any duration, but most farmers are looking for apprentices who will commit for the entire growing season (early March through late October). The usual apprenticeship is an immersive practicum involving labor in return for room and board, instruction, financial compensation and experience.”

This bill was proposed by Lucie Nolden, a Maine college student who participated in the MOFGA apprenticeship program for two summers. In comparing her experiences with other apprentices, she learned that there was a wide range of definitions to room: from a place to pitch a tent to an apartment with electricity, running water, and heat; and a wide range of financial compensation and mentoring. She developed the language of this bill by working with staff of MOFGA and Maine Farmland Trust and in conjunction with legislators and representatives of DACF.

This bill seeks to create a pilot farm apprenticeship program where farmers can mentor and train future farmers who will gain the skills to either start their own farms or partner with older farmers who are developing succession plans. This proposed pilot program will provide \$5,000 grants to Maine farmers to support the costs of mentoring an apprentice. Mentors can apply for up to two of these grants per year. The money can be used to offset the cost of labor, housing or other associated expenses. The minimum apprenticeship period is three months, and during that time, apprentices must be paid minimum wage for 40 hours per week. The proposed pilot project would be administered by the Department of Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry.

The \$125,000 amount presented in the bill would cover the cost of twenty-five apprentices. The pilot project will enable farmers to train individuals who are ready to increase their knowledge and skills beyond what they have learned as entry level farmworkers. This is a targeted workforce development investment specifically designed for Maine farms by those who know what Maine farmers and future farmers need.

Carolyn Sachs, Ph.D., Penn State Professor Emerita of Rural Sociology described the challenges of being a farmer this way:

“Being a farmer, you have to be everything. You have to be able to be the marketing manager, the distribution manager, the accountant, the bookkeeper, and the mechanic. You have so many hats to wear. It is very challenging, and it also uses your whole self. You have to make decisions all of the time that involve ecological concepts and financial concepts and mechanical concepts and integrate all of it.”

This pilot project is designed to help a future farmer gain the experience that will help them be more prepared to move into the role of a farmer. **LD 901** will provide financial support for farmers who take on the role of mentor. I urge you to vote Ought to Pass.