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Good Morning esteemed members of the Agriculture Committee and attendees of today's hearing.

My name is Seth Kroeck and I am an organic farmer. I have been a commercial grower in Brunswick for the last 20 years. In 2022 I was honored to be a recipient of an Agriculture Innovation and Investment Program grant for \$137,000. Having been through other grant processes with the USDA and local non-profits, I found the proposal straightforward and most importantly the funds went directly to the farm without moving through a secondary agency or requiring a reimbursement process that strangles cashflow. This grant was nothing short of transformational for my farm.

Over the past two decades I have made investments in facilities and machinery that have allowed my farm to be more productive. These investments have been slow and in most cases quite risky, not in their long-term value to the operation but in the challenge they bring to the bottom line. Margins in agriculture are small and the annual risk is high when just considering weather alone. Add in limited access to markets, labor shortages, input cost inflation along with limited access to lending, and a farm's ability to make investments beyond annual operating expenses can be out of reach most years. Yet it is these investments in infrastructure on Maine farms that will allow them to grow more food, provide more full-time skilled jobs and continue to be economic keystones in communities large and small throughout the state. Farmer's know what investments are needed on their farms and if given the opportunity, will use dollars quickly and efficiently to make big important improvements on their farms.

My AIIP grant has funded improvements in the farm's wash pack shed and its loading area. I plan on moving 130,000lbs of carrots, 22,000lbs of Brussels sprouts and 40,000lbs of blueberries through this building in the next year on their way to markets. The efficiencies coming from these improvements will not only allow me to continue to deliver to grocery stores but will also mean we can supply schools, processors and Maine's hunger relief programs with high quality local produce at pricing within their budgets as well as ours. In addition to aiding my own products, these improvements will make our farm a hub for other farms looking to package and store their produce before moving on to distributors and markets, extending the agricultural benefits of the grants beyond our gate.

The 2022 AIIP RFP had almost \$200 million in proposed projects competing for \$20 million in funds. Maine agriculture is at a crossroads. Either we can make a concerted effort to build and strengthen our infrastructure or we will continue to lose dairy farms, struggle to find Maine food in the produce aisles and watch our prime ag. soils grow into alders and solar panels.

Thank you for your time and consideration.