



Testimony of Shelley Megquier, Policy and Research Director, Maine Farmland Trust, before the 131th Legislature’s Joint Standing Committee on Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry

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Good morning Senator Ingwersen, Representative Pluecker, and members of the Joint Standing Committee on Agriculture, Conservation, and Forestry. My name is Shelley Megquier and I am testifying today on behalf of Maine Farmland Trust (MFT) in support of the LD 1767 – *An Act to Develop and Provide Technical Assistance for Meat Slaughtering and Processing*.

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 more than 330 farms and keep nearly 60,000 acres of farmland in farming. Our Farm Network includes over 500 farms and, in 2022, 2,250+ individuals demonstrated their commitment to the future of Maine agriculture through an MFT membership. In 2022, MFT supported 48 farm businesses with workshops, technical assistance, and grants – delivering over 680 hours of technical assistance and \$309,000 in business and seed grants to help businesses grow their profitability. Our main program areas are Farmland Protection, Farmland Access, Stewardship, Farm Business Planning, PFAS Support, Climate Resilience, and Policy and Research.

Maine’s rural economic development depends on the economic viability of farm businesses and the strength of our local food system. Over the years, MFT has collaborated with farmers, food businesses, and economic development organizations to establish enterprises and deliver a range of programs and services focused on establishing a vibrant and resilient agricultural sector and food system in Maine. We work directly with farmers of all experience levels, including many meat and poultry producers, as they develop markets and grow successful businesses. In our work we have seen how Maine farmers are constrained by the limited capacity of meat and poultry slaughter and processing infrastructure. Some farmers would like to expand their operations and raise more livestock or poultry for local sale, but aren’t confident they will be able to access facilities to get the animals slaughtered and processed dependably and efficiently. Innovative solutions are needed to grow the supply of Maine-raised meat products available to diverse consumers and to create new and expanded market opportunities for local farms.

There is enormous growth potential for the food sector in Maine and the sectors that support it like farming. In fact, Governor Mills’ 10-year economic development strategy identifies the food sector in Maine as one 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 in that sector.¹ Investment in food processing infrastructure, including for the processing and marketing of meat and poultry within the state, is necessary to growing this important segment of Maine’s economy. Improving local capacity for meat and poultry slaughter and processing also helps advance the state’s climate action plan strategy of “increase[ing] the amount of food consumed in Maine from

¹ *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/inline-files/DECD_120919_sm.pdf

state food producers from 10 percent to 20 percent by 2025 and 30 percent by 2030 through local food system development.”² This strategy recognizes the importance of growing our local food sector to ensure food security for the state given the supply chain disruptions that are anticipated to result from climate change in the future.

LD 1767 builds upon the 2022 Report on *Findings and Recommendations for Supporting Meat Slaughtering and Processing in Maine Pursuant to L.D. 493* to support meat slaughtering and processing in three ways³:

1. Expanding technical assistance to processors through the University of Maine Cooperative Extension;
2. Creating a Committee to explore and make recommendations on workforce training strategies;
3. Funding a feasibility study that assesses the barriers to meat and poultry slaughter and processing in the State, identifies useful information for decision-making, and outlines standards for producing halal, kosher, and other religiously and culturally important meat products.

MFT supports LD 1767 as an important contribution to addressing infrastructure needs in Maine. Increased technical support, better talent development and workforce strengthening, and a stronger understanding of feasibility for new or expanding slaughter and poultry processing businesses will all contribute to a broader and more reliable supply of Maine-raised meat products available to diverse consumers. We also recognize that as Maine’s population changes so too do consumer needs. Better identifying State standards for halal, kosher and other religiously and culturally important meat products will advance access to local meat for Maine’s diverse population, including its growing refugee and immigrant population. Lastly, we support LD 1767 due to the support it will indirectly provide to creating new and expanded market opportunities for local poultry and livestock farmers.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today to share our support of LD 1767. I’m happy to answer any questions you may have.

² Maine Climate Council, *Maine Won’t Wait, A Four-Year Plan for Climate Action* (Dec. 2020) at 13, available at <https://www.maine.gov/climateplan/>

³ Maine Department of Agriculture, Conservation & Forestry, *Findings and Recommendations for Supporting Meat Slaughtering and Processing in Maine Pursuant to L.D. 493* (Jan. 2022) available at <https://legislature.maine.gov/doc/8021>