

Testimony of Jaime Berhanu of Bowdoinham, before the 131st Legislature's Joint Standing Committee on Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry

Good afternoon members of the Joint Standing Committee on Agriculture, Conservation, and Forestry.

My name is Jaime Berhanu, I am a resident of Bowdoinham, and I am writing to you as a market organizer to express my support of LD 2093 - An Act to Address Food Insecurity by Helping Maine Residents Access Locally Produced Food.

I have helped to manage the Food Access Program at the Portland Farmers' Market since 2011, and am also a former farm vendor at this market. The Portland Farmers' Market is cooperatively run by farmers, and has paid staff who fundraise for, and run the Food Access Program on site at our markets. For 2024 alone, we must raise \$45,000 to operate the program year round. Additional funding is needed to support the nutrition incentive program, Maine Harvest Bucks (administered by the Maine Federation of Farmers' Markets) which allows us to match SNAP/EBT purchases at our markets.

Our Food Access Program has been an essential addition to the Portland Farmers' Market. We are able to welcome shoppers who receive SNAP, develop new relationships with community partners and customers, and we have generated new sales for our farmers. In 2022 and 2023 alone, shoppers at our market redeemed \$125,000 in SNAP purchases and an additional \$77,000 in Maine Harvest Bucks. The Food Access Program helps the Portland Farmers' Market, and its farm vendors, fight food insecurity and feed all members of the community.

State funding that helps Maine residents access locally produced foods, will help our market cover the cost of the Maine Harvest Bucks redemption, promote our program to get more community members who receive SNAP, to visit our market. This funding will help us cover the costs of the paid staff who operate the program, as well as help cover the equipment costs to run customers transactions and get the farmers paid.

On a personal note, I want to address that our friends and neighbors are really struggling to keep food on the table. Food insecurity creates a chronic source of stress that affects one's physical and mental health and can create alienation from one's community. Nutrition incentive programs at farmers' markets provide a type of community support that offers dignity and connection with one's community, while providing expanded access to the healthiest and most nutrient dense foods available to us- locally grown food. This is a win win win for our Maine community, gets people shopping outdoors and trying new foods.

I urge the committee to support LD 2093, for continuous funding at the \$1.2 million level per year. If it is continuous, then the Portland Farmers' Market, and the Maine Federation of Farmers' Markets can plan for growth and expansion of the program without any funding uncertainties or interruption.

Thank you for your time,
Jaime Berhanu
Bowdoinham, Maine