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Lewiston  
LD 2093

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

We are writing on behalf of the St. Mary's Nutrition Center, located in Lewiston, Maine. The Nutrition Center brings people together to collectively imagine and build a more just food system and healthy community. The NC is home to integrated programs and initiatives including urban community gardens; school garden and cooking programs; leadership development and training programs for young adults; and food access initiatives including the administration of the Maine Harvest Bucks at the Lewiston Farmers' Market. The Nutrition Center is also home to one of the largest emergency food pantries in the state, serving 150-250 households per distribution day – we see first-hand the food security challenges facing our communities.

Alongside our programming, we have helped convene cross-sector collaborations to facilitate local and regional food systems change for over 20 years. This work includes supporting the Lewiston Farmers' Market in being the very first in the state to accept SNAP/EBT in 2004 and later helping to introduce, grow and develop nutrition incentive programs like the Maine Harvest Bucks program locally at the LFM and at state level in partnership with organizations such as the Maine Federation of Farmers' Markets, Maine Farmland Trust, and Maine Organic Farmers and Gardeners Association.

Our commitment to the Maine Harvest Bucks throughout the years has been motivated by the witnessing the demonstrated and positive impact the program has on the health and wellbeing of market shoppers and the livelihood of small-scale farmers. The Lewiston Farmers' Market participated in Maine Harvest Bucks since its inception, supporting hundreds of households receiving SNAP. A recent survey of market customers found that more than a third said that the Maine Harvest Bucks program was VERY important to their ability to purchase fruits and vegetables and that they eat more fresh fruits and vegetables because of the program. Additionally, although the LFM is a mid-size market, many of the vendors continue to rate it as its top performing selling market and consistently say they love that most of their customers are neighbors. Programs like the MHB help keep the market accessible to diverse communities of culture and class and amplify the dollars spent there. The LFM saw a nearly 100% growth in Maine Harvest Bucks redemption between 2020 and 2021 alone; all dollars that went directly in the pocket of farmers.

The Nutrition Center is committed to continuing to devote our time, energy and experience to make the Maine Harvest Bucks program successful and sustainable at the local and state level through fundraising efforts. Having the state be a collaborate and dependable ongoing partner in keeping this program viable is critical: being able to rely on consistent, budgeted match would help to free up support organizations like the Nutrition Center to devote more time to administering and strengthening the program on the ground for consumers at risk for food insecurity and for small scale farmers investing in their livelihood. For these reasons we strongly encourage the state to adopt LD 2093.