



**Testimony of Shelley Megquier, Policy and Research Director, Maine Farmland Trust, before
the 131th Legislature’s Joint Standing Committee on Criminal Justice and Public Safety**

January 22, 2024

Good morning Senator Beebe-Center, Representative Salisbury, and members of the Joint Standing Committee on Criminal Justice and Public Safety. My name is Shelley Megquier and I am testifying today on behalf of Maine Farmland Trust (MFT) in support of the LD 2053—*An Act to Exempt Buildings Used to Cultivate Crops from the Maine Uniform Building and Energy Code*.

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 340 farms and keep over 60,000 acres of farmland in farming. Our Farm Network includes over 500 farms and in 2023, MFT supported 58 farm businesses with workshops, technical assistance, and grants – delivering over 612 hours of technical assistance and \$197,000 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 7,600 farm businesses are an essential part of the state’s economy, environment, and culture. Some benefits of farms are obvious—the diversity of foods and other products they produce, as well as the scenic beauty they provide. Yet other benefits are less obvious, such as how farms serve as rural economic development engines, strengthen our resilience to climate change, bolster food security, and create access to a variety of recreational pursuits. Today, Maine farmers are contending with significant economic and environmental challenges. Farmers are on the front lines of climate change: their livelihoods and the food security of our communities are directly impacted by changes we are already seeing in our climate. As the state’s updated climate action plan *Maine Won’t Wait* makes clear, “[w]arming temperatures and increasingly variable precipitation, including droughts and extreme weather events, are causing damage to farm livelihoods, impacting farmers, workers, crops, and livestock.”¹ Farms of all types and sizes are needing to become more resilient to the impacts of climate change so that their businesses can withstand these unpredictable conditions.

Farmers across Maine are increasingly turning to the construction of greenhouses, high tunnels, and similar plastic-covered structures to protect their crops, extend growing seasons, dramatically increase yields, and expand crop options throughout the year. These structures can boost farm viability and support farms to withstand the increasingly unpredictable conditions that are accompanying climate change in Maine. The increasing role these structures play in the ability of Maine farmers to develop more innovative and diverse operations has important implications for towns and cities that are looking for ways to support the resilience of local farms in their communities. Any actions municipalities are able to take at the local level to add flexibility into the

¹ The Maine Climate Council, *Maine Won’t Wait: A Four-Year Plan for Climate Action*, p. 25, (Dec. 2020), available at: www.maine.gov/future/sites/maine.gov.future/files/inlinefiles/MaineWontWait_December2020.pdf.

permitting processes associated with greenhouses and high tunnels, such as reducing or eliminating permitting fees or creating more flexible permitting requirements, can help make the use of these structures more accessible and affordable to agricultural producers across the state.

MFT supports LD 2053 because it would update the Maine Uniform Building and Energy Code (MUBEC) to include the cultivation of crops (except marijuana) as one of the uses of an agricultural structure that qualifies it for exemption under MUBEC, in addition to the currently exempt uses of housing of livestock and harvested crops. This change recognizes the increase in use of agricultural structures to grow food, and enables more municipalities that have adopted MUBEC to develop flexible and responsive permitting processes for structures like greenhouses and high tunnels, thereby supporting the resilience of local farms and their communities.

Thank you very much for the opportunity to speak in support of LD 2053 today.