



MAINE FARMLAND TRUST

Testimony of Ellen Stern Griswold, Policy and Research Director, Maine Farmland Trust, before the 130th Legislature's Joint Standing Committee on Environment and Natural Resources

May 17, 2021

Good morning Senator Brenner, Representative Tucker, and members of the Joint Standing Committee on Environment and Natural Resources. My name is Ellen Griswold, and I am testifying today on behalf of Maine Farmland Trust (MFT) in support of LD 1429 – *An Act to Implement the Most Time-Sensitive Recommendations of the Maine Climate Council*.

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 nearly 300 farms and keep over 60,000 acres of farmland in farming, while supporting over 800 farm families with a range of services. Our four main program areas are Farmland Protection, Farmland Access, Farm Viability in the form of business planning and technical assistance to help farmers become and remain economically viable, and Public Outreach and Policy to grow the future of farming in Maine. We also operate a nutrition incentive program that provides additional money to low-income shoppers to buy more locally-grown fruits and vegetables, thereby building sales for Maine farmers and keeping more dollars in Maine's food economy.

Protecting farmland in Maine is a principal part of our mission because we believe it is vital for ensuring that agriculture remains a key component of Maine's way of life, with farms feeding our economy, stewarding our natural resources, and nourishing our communities. Farmland protection not only ensures that we have the land base to support our farm economy, but it is also a critical tool for both increasing the financial security of farmers and increasing farmer access to land. Compensating farmers for protecting their land allows them to use the funds they receive to reinvest in the farm, pay off debt, or obtain some savings before passing the farm along to the next generation. And once land is protected, it can be sold at its agricultural value, making the farmland much more affordable for other farmers to purchase. Protecting land is also a key natural climate solution by avoiding the greater emissions associated with developed land, by ensuring we have the farmland needed to create greater food security for our state, and by preserving the climate benefits that can result from farmers using climate smart practices on the land.

MFT understands that climate change is one of the most daunting challenges of our time, and will have significant impacts on Maine's agricultural sector. As the state's updated climate action plan 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 These impacts could have ramifications for the entire state, as agriculture is a key component of Maine’s economy, contributing over \$3.6 billion in economic impact and supporting over 27,000 jobs statewide according to an analysis by Farm Credit East.² At the same time, warming temperatures could provide new seasonal opportunities for Maine farmers³ if farmers have the right tools to adapt to the changing climate.

Over the last 19 months or so, I have appreciated being a part of the Maine Climate Council’s Natural and Working Lands Working Group, and MFT was thrilled to see the inclusion of many important agriculture-related strategies in the new climate action plan. Principal among those strategies is increasing the total acreage of conserved land in the state, including farmland, to 30% by 2030; growing the local and regional agriculture sector to ensure our future food security; and providing farmers with greater support to build soil health through increased financial, technical, and research assistance, thereby enhancing farm resilience and profitability, and sequestering greenhouse gas emissions.⁴ Soils can become depleted over time through repeated use, which can result in soil erosion, nutrient and water holding issues, and lower crop yields. Continually improving soil health helps to prevent these challenges, naturally keeping productivity high and enhancing agricultural resilience to droughts, pests, and heat waves, among other impacts.

LD 1429 contains several provisions that would help to advance these important agricultural strategies in the new climate action plan, including providing funding for the Land for Maine’s Future (LMF) Program to support land conservation in the state, providing greater technical assistance to farmers to support the adoption of climate smart practices, providing funding to the University of Maine to support research efforts related to natural climate solutions, supporting the expansion of broadband infrastructure throughout the state, and expanding farm to school efforts as part of agricultural market development. MFT would note that there are efforts underway already to achieve some of these objectives, such as legislation to develop the Maine Healthy Soils Program at the Department of Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry (DACF), and other LMF and broadband expansion funding mechanisms. The related provisions within LD 1429 should be coordinated with these other efforts to avoid duplication and ensure that public resources are used as effectively as possible. MFT would also hope that state agencies such as DACF are provided with the resources needed to carry out these ambitious objectives, and that the farm to school provisions are structured to ensure that farmers within the state receive fair compensation for their products. But we appreciate the leadership of House Majority Leader Dunphy in helping to move forward these important climate action plan strategies. We hope that you will support these important provisions, and ensure that agriculture remains an important part of Maine’s climate action plan and a vibrant part of Maine’s economy.

¹ The Maine Climate Council, “Maine Won’t Wait: A Four-Year Plan for Climate Action,” (Dec. 2020), 25, available at https://climatecouncil.maine.gov/future/sites/maine.gov.future/files/inline-files/MaineWontWait_December2020_printable_12.1.20.pdf (Maine Climate Action Plan).

² Farm Credit East, “Northeast Economic Engine: Agriculture, Forest Products and Commercial Fishing,” (2020), available at: <https://www.farmcrediteast.com/knowledge-exchange/Reports/2020%20Northeast%20Economic%20Engine>.

³ Maine Climate Action Plan at 25.

⁴ See *e.g.* Maine Climate Action Plan at 66, 69, 78-80.