



**Testimony of Abby Farnham, Assistant Director, Policy and Research, Maine Farmland Trust,  
to the 132<sup>nd</sup> Legislature's Committee on Housing and Economic Development  
February 27, 2025**

Good morning Senator Curry, Representative Gere, and members of the Joint Standing Committee on Housing and Economic Development. My name is Abby Farnham and I am providing testimony on behalf of Maine Farmland Trust (MFT) in support of LD 161, *Resolve, Directing the Department of Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry to Convene a Stakeholder Group Tasked with a Comprehensive Overhaul and Modernization of the State Subdivision Laws*.

MFT is a member-powered statewide organization that works to protect farmland, support farmers, and advance the future of farming. Our goals are to keep agricultural lands working and help farmers and their communities thrive. Since our founding in 1999, MFT has helped to permanently protect farmland in every county in Maine, amounting to nearly 57,000 acres across 345 farms. Our Farm Network includes more than 550 farms that have participated in MFT's Farmland Protection & Access, Business Planning, Climate Resilience, and PFAS Support programs. We also provide outreach and technical assistance to municipalities on local policy tools and planning strategies to support farms and farmland protection in communities across the state.

Farmland is the foundation for thriving farm businesses, communities, and rural economies. But, farmland in Maine is at risk of being lost to agriculture due to increasing development pressures, a growing interest in farmland from non-farming buyers, dramatic increases in the cost of land, and farm viability challenges that are making it harder for farmers to afford to keep their land in agriculture.

Between 2017 and 2022, more than 82,000 acres of farmland fell out of agricultural production, and in the decade spanning 2012 to 2022, Maine lost almost 230,000 acres of farmland.<sup>1</sup> Maine's farmland is at risk from all types of development, including low-density residential development, which fragments the agricultural land base and limits the production and land access options for an area's remaining working farms and for new farms that are looking to start their operations.<sup>2</sup>

MFT supports LD 161 because it would establish a stakeholder group to review state subdivision statute and come up with recommendations to modernize subdivision laws so that they better promote development in growth areas and reduce development pressure in rural areas. MFT believes this bill is important because updates to subdivision law, and thoughtful and

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<sup>1</sup> USDA, NASS, *Census of Agriculture for 2022, Maine*, "Historical Highlights: 2022 and Earlier Census Years."

<sup>2</sup> American Farmland Trust, (2020) *Farms Under Threat: The State of the States*, "Agricultural Land Conversion Highlight Summary: Maine."

comprehensive review by a stakeholder group on needed changes, are important pieces of the puzzle for advancing land use policies and strategies that balance growth and the need for increased housing in Maine with the need to protect our state's working farms and valuable agricultural land. MFT would be very happy to support the work of this stakeholder group, including by helping to identify and evaluate unique considerations for farmland and agriculture within subdivision law.

We offer the suggestion to add "protect working lands" to the objectives of this stakeholder review that are outlined Sec. 1 of the bill, and we also support the suggestion made by other stakeholders to add "conserve water quality, natural resources, and recreation access" to this section of the bill. Adding these objectives would help guide the stakeholder group's review and recommendations as they relate to specific impacts of subdivision law on Maine's valued agricultural and natural resources.

To add to the important opportunity this bill would create for input from various interests, we also suggest expanding the stakeholder group membership outlined in Sec. 2 of the bill to include "a representative of the land trust or nonprofit conservation community," and "a representative of a nonprofit organization dedicated to community-based planning." These additions would help support a thorough review and range of perspectives contributing to this stakeholder group's effort to evaluate and modernize the state subdivision statutes.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony today in support of LD 161.