



**Testimony of Abby Farnham, Assistant Director, Policy and Research, Maine Farmland Trust,  
to the 131<sup>st</sup> Legislature's Joint Select Committee on Housing  
April 14, 2023**

Good morning Senator Pierce, Representative Gere, and members of the Joint Select Committee on Housing. My name is Abby Farnham and I am testifying today on behalf of Maine Farmland Trust (MFT) in support of LD 724, *An Act to Expand Workforce Housing in Rural Maine by Funding the Maine State Housing Authority's Rural Affordable Rental Housing Program*.

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 330 farms and keep nearly 60,000 acres of farmland in farming. In 2022 alone, MFT supported 48 farm businesses with workshops, technical assistance, and grants – delivering over 680 hours of technical assistance and \$309,000 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.

MFT believes that to support Maine's rural economic development, farms must be economically viable. We often hear from farmers about the recurring challenge they have with labor supply and retention as well as the rising costs of labor. Farmers increasingly face challenges finding labor they need, when they need it. The lack of available, affordable and adequate housing, particularly in rural parts of the state, is contributing to the agricultural labor shortages that Maine farmers are experiencing.

MFT supports LD 724 because it would help to address the need for workforce housing in Maine's rural communities by providing funding to the Rural Affordable Rental Housing Program within the Maine State Housing Authority for the development of smaller affordable rental housing projects. This legislation won't solve farm labor challenges, but it is an important piece of the puzzle. Solutions to farm labor challenges will help to support the economic viability of Maine's agricultural sector, and agriculture is a key component of Maine's economy overall, contributing over \$3.6 billion in economic impact and supporting over 27,000 jobs statewide.<sup>1</sup>

While not necessarily within the scope of this bill, we also want to put forward the importance of directing development away from working agricultural lands. The 2017 Census of Agriculture

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<sup>1</sup> Farm Credit East, "Northeast Economic Engine: Agriculture, Forest Products and Commercial Fishing," (2020), available at: [www.farmcrediteast.com/resources/Industry-Trends-and-Outlooks/Reports/2020-Northeast-Economic-Engine#2020economicengine](http://www.farmcrediteast.com/resources/Industry-Trends-and-Outlooks/Reports/2020-Northeast-Economic-Engine#2020economicengine)

showed that between 2012 and 2017, Maine lost more than 10 percent of its farmland, over 146,000 acres<sup>2</sup>—making Maine one of the top five states in the country with the highest percentage of farmland lost.<sup>3</sup> Maine’s farmland is at risk from all types of development, including low-density residential development, which fragments the agricultural land base and threatens the viability of an area’s remaining working farms.<sup>4</sup> The application of smart growth principles that reduce sprawl and balance the need for additional housing, particularly affordable housing, with the need to protect our state’s working farms and critical agricultural resources is essential for addressing the affordable housing crisis in ways that also ensure we have the land base needed to grow our agricultural economy and create greater food security for our state.

Thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony in support of LD 724.

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<sup>2</sup> In 2012, Maine had 1,454,104 acres in farmland, but by 2017 that number had dropped to 1,307,566 acres – a loss of 146,491 acres or 10% of Maine’s farmland. United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), National Agricultural Statistics Service (NASS), *U.S. Census of Agriculture for 2017, Maine*, [https://www.nass.usda.gov/Publications/AgCensus/2017/Full\\_Report/Volume\\_1,\\_Chapter\\_1\\_State\\_Level/Maine/mev1.pdf](https://www.nass.usda.gov/Publications/AgCensus/2017/Full_Report/Volume_1,_Chapter_1_State_Level/Maine/mev1.pdf).

<sup>3</sup> American Farmland Trust, “2017 Census of Agriculture,” <https://farmlandinfo.org/2017-census-of-agriculture/>

<sup>4</sup> American Farmland Trust, *Farms Under Threat: The State of the States*, “Agricultural Land Conversion Highlight Summary: Maine,” (2020).