



**Testimony of Shelley Megquier, Maine Farmland Trust, to the 131st Legislature's
Joint Select Committee on Housing
February 6, 2024**

Good afternoon Senator Pierce, Representative Gere, and members of the Joint Select Committee on Housing. My name is Shelley Megquier and I am providing testimony today on behalf of Maine Farmland Trust (MFT) in support of LD 2169, *An Act to Support the Development of Workforce Housing to Promote Economic Development in Maine*.

MFT is a member-powered statewide organization that works to protect farmland, support farmers, and advance the future of farming. Our goal is to keep agricultural lands working and help farmers and their communities thrive. 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. Our Farm Network includes over 500 farms and in 2023, MFT supported 58 farm businesses with workshops, technical assistance, and grants – delivering over 600 hours of technical assistance and \$197,000 in business and seed grants to help businesses grow their profitability.

Maine's 1.3 million acres of working farmland and 7,600 farm businesses create diverse and far-reaching benefits for our state and communities, including serving as economic development engines for rural communities, strengthening our resilience to climate change, bolstering food security, providing habitat needed to sustain wildlife, creating access to a variety of recreational pursuits, and contributing to Maine's valued sense of rural character.

At the same time, Maine agriculture is facing significant challenges that threaten the viability of farms and farmers' ability to keep their land in agricultural production. We increasingly hear from farmers about the recurring challenge they have with finding and retaining reliable and skilled workers. The lack of available, affordable, and adequate housing in rural and farming communities across the state is contributing to the agricultural workforce shortages that farm businesses are experiencing.

LD 2169 proposes establishing a loan fund within Maine's Department of Economic and Community Development to support the development of affordable workforce housing. MFT supports this bill because more housing would serve as an important piece of the puzzle in addressing farm labor challenges, and because affordable workforce housing is critical to the economic resilience of local communities broadly.

Solutions to farm labor challenges will help to support the economic viability of agriculture as a key sector of Maine's economy, contributing over \$3.6 billion in economic impact and supporting over 27,000 jobs statewide.¹ Maine's farms spend over \$585 million annually on expenses such as feed,

¹ Farm Credit East, *Northeast Economic Engine: Agriculture, Forest Products and Commercial Fishing*, p. 9 (2020), available at: www.farmcrediteast.com/resources/Industry-Trends-and-Outlooks/Reports/2020-Northeast-Economic-Engine#2020economicengine.

fertilizer, electricity, labor, rent, and fuel.² Most of these purchases are made locally, supporting a large number of secondary businesses, including farm supply stores, equipment dealers, machine repair shops, veterinarians, crop services, and fuel suppliers. Maine farms are vital to the state's tourism industry, providing much of the working landscapes and small-town character that attract tourists. Working farms also make possible a diverse array of year-round recreational opportunities and agritourism activities, including farmers' markets, corn mazes, agricultural fairs, and pick-your-own operations. Farming plays a key role in supporting Maine's broader food sector, too, which Governor Janet Mills' 10-year economic development strategy identifies as one of the four areas most ripe for economic development because of the state's current strengths, the growing global demand, and the potential for job creation.³

We also want to emphasize the importance of housing development policy efforts being advanced *alongside* land use policy and planning strategies that support smart growth principles and protect natural and working lands. It is critical that we address the need for more housing in Maine, especially affordable housing as this bill seeks to do, but this must be done thoughtfully and in a way that protects our state's working farms and critical agricultural resources including prime farmland soils and soils of statewide importance.

Thank you for the opportunity to share our support for LD 2169 and its important role in bolstering the viability of agriculture in Maine.

² United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), National Agricultural Statistics Service (NASS), *Census of Agriculture for 2017, Maine*, "Farm Production Expenses."

³ Maine Department of Economic and Community Development, *Maine Economic Development Strategy (2020-2029): A Focus on Talent and Innovation*, p. 14 (2019), available at: www.maine.gov/decd/strategic-plan