



Testimony of the Maine Organic Farmers and Gardeners Association
in support of
LD 2169 - *An Act to Support the Development of Workforce Housing
to Promote Economic Development in Maine*

February 6, 2024

Good afternoon Senator Pierce, Representative Gere and members of the Committee on Housing. My name is Heather Spalding and I am deputy director of the Maine Organic Farmers and Gardeners Association (MOFGA). I am speaking today in support of LD 2169 - *An Act to Support the Development of Workforce Housing to Promote Economic Development in Maine*.

MOFGA is working to build a food system that is healthy and fair for all of us. Through education, training and advocacy, we are helping farmers thrive, making more local, organic food available and building sustainable communities. MOFGA certifies 526 organic farms and processing operations representing more than \$120 million in sales and we are working hard to create opportunities for Maine's next generation of farmers. Each of these farmers is a Maine businessperson for whom economic health and environmental health are interdependent. While MOFGA envisions a future of healthy ecosystems, communities, people and economies sustained by the practices of organic agriculture, we attribute our success to collaboration and outreach to growers across the management spectrum.

In Maine's farm economy, the labor shortage and housing shortage are two sides of the same coin. We hear regularly from MOFGA farmers that the state's labor shortage and diminishing access to affordable land and housing are two of the biggest challenges they face with their business plans. If we want to build self-reliance on food production in Maine and achieve our Climate Action Plan goal of 30% food produced and consumed in Maine by 2030, we have to address our rural housing and labor shortages.

MOFGA has been committed to building Maine's farm workforce since 1974, when our apprenticeship program started. Congresswoman Chellie Pingree was the catalyst for that program, inspired by her experience working on MOFGA-certified organic Hillside Farm in Camden. Thousands of people have participated in this and other MOFGA farm training programs through the years, and many of them have gone on to start their own farms and host apprentices who also have become farmers. Now, however, economic forces are making it very challenging for people interested in farm work to make ends meet, and the Maine's housing shortage in rural areas is a significant factor in the reduction of the farm workforce.

LD 2169 is an important piece of the puzzle. It would establish the Workforce Housing Development Loan Fund in the Department of Economic and Community Development to provide loans to support the development of affordable workforce housing. Community banks



would be able to provide 0% interest loans to housing developers in order to build affordable housing for workers who earn 60% to 120% of the local median income.

Affordable housing in rural areas would be helpful to Maine farms of all sizes using all management practices. It would help farmers provide more opportunities for Maine residents who would like to work on farms, as well as migrant and seasonal workers who provide the critically needed extra labor during intensive harvest seasons.

We hope that this legislation moves forward with your blessing and we also would like to ensure that the program has certain standards to ensure social and environmental justice and farmland protection, as well as compliance with existing worker protection standards such as workforce housing regulations of the federal H2-A Temporary and Agricultural Workers Visa Program. We encourage you to make the loans available to farms and farm businesses in addition to the community banks.

Here is a list of factors that could be taken into account when prioritizing which applications for 0% interest loans are approved.

- Put special emphasis on housing for seasonal and migrant laborers who are essential for the success of Maine farm businesses at specific times of year in specific sectors. Seasonal and migrant labor needs in agriculture could be considered in relation to other sectors or the economy that also have peaks and valleys in labor needs, e.g. tourism.
- Prioritize proposals that provide for needs of migrant farmworker families with children. For example, housing could include facilities for daycare services.
- Similarly, housing proposals could coordinate with transportation services for farmworkers to help them get to work, to commerce centers, and to social activities.
- Prioritize projects that avoid development on Maine's prime farmland soils and soils of statewide importance.
- Prioritize housing proposals that emphasize the use of local, green materials with environmentally friendly, climate-smart architecture.
- Ensure racial equity is elevated and honored in all all approved housing projects.

In closing, I would also like to say that MOFGA shares the ideal of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights¹, which recognizes adequate housing as a component of the human right to an adequate standard of living. Housing is an essential component for an individual's progress toward self-sufficiency and away from dependency.

Thank you for your consideration of this legislation. I urge the Committee to vote unanimously in support of LD 2169. I would be happy to answer questions if you have any.

¹ Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Proclaimed by the United Nations General Assembly in Paris on 10 December 1948 (General Assembly resolution 217 A).
<<https://www.un.org/en/about-us/universal-declaration-of-human-rights>>

The Maine Organic Farmers and Gardeners Association (MOFGA) started in 1971 and is the oldest and largest state organic organization in the country. We're a broad-based community that educates about and advocates for organic agriculture, illuminating its interdependence with a healthy environment, local food production, and thriving communities. We have 15,000 members, we certify more than 500 organic farms and processing facilities representing \$120 million in sales, and we are working hard to provide training and create opportunities for Maine's next generation of farmers. Each of these farmers is a Maine businessperson for whom economic health and environmental health are interdependent. While MOFGA envisions a future of healthy ecosystems, communities, people and economies sustained by the practices of organic agriculture, we attribute our success to collaboration and outreach to growers across the management spectrum.