



February 6th, 2024

Senator Teresa Pierce
Representative Traci Gere
Members of the Committee on Housing

RE: Testifying in Support of LD 2169, An Act to Support the Development of Workforce Housing to Promote Economic Development in Maine

My name is Eric Venturini, and I am the President of the Agricultural Council of Maine.

The Agricultural Council of Maine (AGCOM) is a non-profit association that brings together the major sectors that comprise Maine's agricultural economy. The council meets monthly to provide a forum for ongoing communication and coordination between and amongst these sectors, and provides leadership and advocacy on the most pressing agricultural issues of today.

AGCOM strives for consensus-based decision-making. Our organization represents the full array of Maine's diverse agricultural sectors. Each sector brings to the table its own unique perspective, issues, and opportunities. When these diverse perspectives all find common cause and AGCOM takes a stand, you can be sure that issue is of vital importance to Maine agriculture.

Today's workforce challenge is, perhaps, one of the most significant barriers to the viability of Maine farms from small to large. Most agricultural sectors are seasonal, reaching peak employment during the spring, summer, and fall. Finding a reliable seasonal workforce to fill this workforce demand is a growing challenge. Increasingly farmers hire workers from outside of the borders of Maine, or outside of the borders of the country to fulfill their seasonal demand. Bringing workers in, whether from Georgia or Mexico, requires that farmers provide workforce housing. While most of Maine's farms exist in the rural parts of Maine, most of Maine's housing is in areas with the highest population densities, a mismatch that only makes the workforce housing crisis more acute for agriculture.

Agricultural sectors across the nation have increasingly turned to the H2-A Agricultural Worker Visa Program to help solve this workforce crisis. In fact, in the three-year period between 2020 and 2023 the use of the H2-A program has increased by more than 20% in the northeast.¹ Workforce housing is a prerequisite of program participation, and many producers that would use the program are unable to simply because housing is unavailable and they lack the capital needed to build it. The bill before you today would help to provide that capital. It would help us to resolve this challenge.

Senator Daughtry, the bill's sponsor, and Senator Ingwerson, co-sponsor and Chair of the Committee on Agriculture, Conservation, and Forestry were kind enough to provide an overview of this bill to AGCOM

¹ V. Nigh. 2023. H-2A Growth Slows, But Remains Strong. American Farm Bureau. Released December 7, 2023. <https://www.fb.org/market-intel/h-2a-growth-slows-but-remains-strong#:~:text=This%20new%20record%20usage%20of,released%20the%20Farm%20Labor%20Report%20>

last week. During that meeting, AGCOM raised several points, which I will share with you now:

- This program and its rules should allow for the construction of farm workforce housing specified to fulfill the rules and regulations of the federal H2-A Temporary and Agricultural Workers Visa Program.
- The bill describes a program with 0% interest loans. Understanding the current economic challenges of Maine farms, we support the proposed rate of 0% and ask that the same rate be applied to farms and farm businesses using the program, not just to community banks.
- The construction footprint under this program should avoid the loss of prime farmland soils and soils of statewide importance and minimize other impacts that construction could have on farm soils and businesses.
- The program should encourage the development of workforce housing in rural Maine, not just high-density towns and cities, especially in the rural parts of our coastal and agriculturally important counties.

On behalf of the Agricultural Council of Maine, I ask you to vote Ought To Pass. Additionally, I ask that you include the perspectives of Maine farmers, and address their needs and comments as the program develops.

Thank you for your time and consideration. I would be happy to answer any questions that you may have.

Sincerely,



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Agricultural Council of Maine Members:

Maine Aquaculture Association
Maine Association of Conservation Districts
Maine Christmas Tree Association
Maine Dairy Industry Association
Maine Farm Bureau
Maine Farmland Trust
Maine Maple Producers
Maine Organic Farmers and Gardeners Association
Maine Organic Milk Producers
Maine Potato Board
Maine Sheep Breeders Association
Maine Beef Producers Association

Maine State Pomological Society
Maine Sustainable Agriculture Society
Maine Vegetable and Small Fruit Growers Association
Ornamental Horticulture Council
Wild Blueberry Commission of Maine