



Maine Organic Farmers and Gardeners Association

Common Ground Country Fair

April 7, 2021

Good morning Senator Hickman, Representative Sylvester and members of the Joint Standing Committee on Labor and Housing. My name is Heather Spalding and I'm deputy director of the Maine Organic Farmers and Gardeners Association (MOFGA). I appreciate the opportunity to provide comments generally in support of LD 151 - *An Act To Protect Farm Workers by Allowing Them To Organize for the Purpose of Collective Bargaining*.

I'll tell you a bit about our organization and what we're doing to help Maine's agricultural economy including the workforce. I would like to say at the outset, however, we do have concerns about this bill and we hope that the "agricultural employer" definition would be increased significantly, possibly from 5 to 30 or maybe tenfold.

MOFGA is celebrating its 50th anniversary this year. We are 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 a staff of just under 50 employees, a membership of more than 10,000, and an amazing community of about 2500 volunteers, many of whom we rely on to help organize hundreds of educational workshops for farmers, farm workers, homesteaders, gardeners and the general public, throughout the year and at our annual Common Ground Country Fair.

MOFGA is a statewide organization that has experienced significant growth over the past couple of decades. By the year 2030, we aim to increase the number of certified organic growers from 550 to 750 and the amount of organically managed land from 7% to 10% of the state's agricultural land.

MOFGA Certification Services (MCS) is our USDA accredited organic certification program. MCS also administers MOFGA's Certified Clean Cannabis program for medicinal and adult cannabis use in Maine. MCS certifies more than 70,000 acres of farmland in Maine, representing more than \$60 million in organic farm product sales. MOFGA-certified operations are run by Maine businesspeople for whom economic health and environmental health are interdependent. While we envision 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. We are members of the Agricultural Council of Maine and, while we don't always agree on all policy measures, we recognize and wholeheartedly agree that farmers must be financially successful if we expect to have a healthy Maine agriculture.

MOFGA offers an introductory farm apprenticeship program, beginning farmer training through our two-year Journey person program, and a Farm Resilience Program for farmers in years 5-10 of their business when they're statistically the most likely to experience business failure. As an organization working hard to develop Maine's agricultural economy and farm labor pool, our focus has not been on collective bargaining. We have dedicated vast human and financial resources to training the next generation of Maine farmers. Many farmers who own MOFGA-certified operations got their start as

apprentices on MOFGA farms decades ago. They now are hosting apprentices and committing to being mentors as well as bosses.

LD 151 represents a critical topic for United States agriculture, it's important for Maine agriculture, and it's very challenging for many of the small and family-owned farms in MOFGA's community. We believe that workers should be able to advocate for their interests without fear of retribution and we appreciate that advocacy is easier when there is a united front. Therein lies the challenge for MOFGA. We have divergent opinions on how this bill would help or hinder progress toward a more local, more organic Maine agriculture.

We have heard from former apprentices that farm workers should have the same rights as all other workers. We have heard from some farmers who concur. And we have heard from other farmers who feel that this shouldn't apply to small farms and should be geared toward operations with 30 or maybe 50 employees.

We absolutely agree that there is a need to ensure worker safety and just compensation for farmer workers, and we recognize that the economic, political, seasonal and environmental forces that impact farming are very different from other employment sectors. We would like to see more models to ensure that all farm workers are protected, that their voices are honored and that Maine's small farms are not forced further and further to the margins of their business plans.

Thank you very much for your consideration.