



Maine Organic Farmers and Gardeners Association

Common Ground Country Fair

April 11, 2021

Dear 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:

- **in opposition to LD 543 - *An Act To Provide That the Minimum Wage Increases by the Cost of Living Every 3 Years***, which would change the annual cost-of-living increase in the minimum hourly wage from annual to triennial, and
- **in support of LD 1279 - *An Act To Increase the Minimum Wage***, which would increase the minimum hourly wage, starting January 1, 2022, from its present \$12.15 per hour to \$13.00 per hour and by an additional \$1.00 per hour each year until the minimum wage on January 1, 2025 is \$16.00 per hour. Beginning January 1, 2026 and every year after, the minimum wage increases by the increase, if any, in the price of living index.

MOFGA is creating a food system that is healthy and fair for all of us. Through education, training and advocacy, MOFGA is helping farmers thrive, making more local, organic food available and building sustainable communities. A critical aspect of sustainability in our rural communities is decent living wages for farm workers who work throughout the year under physically demanding conditions in all types of Maine weather. These workers produce the healthy, fresh, local foods that we enjoy and, increasingly, demand. We do understand that this bill does not specifically address the agricultural exemption in Maine's and the federal government's labor laws, but we do feel that this is a complementary bill to LD 1022, and we think this is important for rural communities in general.

Last week MOFGA provided testimony on bills specifically focusing on agricultural labor. We have consistently supported increasing the minimum wage when the topic has come before the Legislature. Our farmers have provided feedback to our office that most already are paying minimum wage to their farm workers, though some are not yet able to afford overtime. We recognize that removing the agricultural worker exemption from Maine's employee wage laws is uncertain and is under consideration by this committee. Regardless of how that bill progresses in this legislative session, we feel that keeping pace with cost of living increases is responsible and fair. We do not see a reason for lengthening the increases to a triennial schedule, as proposed in LD 543, and we prefer the legislation proposed by Representative Collings in LD 1279.

MOFGA acknowledges that, as a non-profit, 501(c)3 organization, we have a different set of economic challenges and opportunities different from those of small businesses including farms in Maine. As an employer of more than 40 individuals, MOFGA strives to provide excellent employee compensation and generous benefits. While earned income represents a significant portion (slightly more than a third) of our annual budget, we achieve our employment goals through revenue and support that generally are foreign to a Maine farm business plan. Charitable giving and volunteerism are cornerstones of MOFGA's financial wellbeing. Our staff is ever grateful for this support, and we are mindful of the limited range of revenue options available to our core stakeholders – the farmers - many of whom are very close to their profit margins. We believe that the food and agriculture system is broken and that we, as a society, need to place greater value on fresh, local food so that farmers can afford to pay their workers and themselves decent living wages to live sustainably. This doesn't necessarily mean that we have to increase the cost of food dramatically and abruptly. We feel that there are opportunities to provide greater public support for small farm businesses and their workers in Maine through a reassessment of the subsidies that overwhelmingly go to industrial agriculture.

This public support should prioritize decent living wages and basic benefits such as paid time off and medical insurance. LD 1279 is an important companion bill to LD 1022, which addresses the agricultural exemptions in Maine's labor laws.

We appreciate the work of this committee and hope that, while Maine works hard to create more competitive employment opportunities, we simultaneously designate more public support for our farmers and farm workers who take huge risks to ensure that we have healthy food on our tables throughout the year.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Heather Spalding
MOFGA Deputy Director

About MOFGA

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 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.

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.