



Testimony before the Joint Standing Committee on Agriculture, Conservation, and Forestry
By Chelsea Gazillo, American Farmland Trust, New England Policy Manager
March 4, 2021

RE: Support for LD 437 – An Act to Establish the Maine Healthy Soils Program

Senator Dill, Representative O’Neil, and members of the Joint Standing Committee on Agriculture, Conservation, and Forestry, my name is Chelsea Gazillo, and I am American Farmland Trust’s New England Policy Manager. I appreciate this opportunity to testify on behalf of American Farmland Trust **in support** of LD 437 – An Act to Establish the Maine Healthy Soils Program.

AFT is the nation’s leading conservation organization dedicated to protecting farmland, promoting sound farming practices, and keeping farmers on the land. Since its founding in 1980 by farmers and citizens concerned about the rapid loss of farmland to development, AFT has helped protect over 6.5 million acres of farmland and led the way for the adoption of conservation practices on millions more. Established in 1985, AFT’s New England office works to save the land that sustains us across the region.

Healthy soil practices are climate smart practices. As Maine strives to increase local food production, increasing the adoption of healthy soil practices is of paramount importance. Farm producers that implement these climate change adaptation practices increase productivity, mitigate greenhouse gas emissions, sequester carbon, improve the overall agricultural viability for the state’s food producers and Maine’s food economy. In December 2020, Governor Mills announced the completion of the state’s Climate Action Plan, [Maine Won’t Wait](#). This comprehensive plan provides recommendations as to how Maine can greatly reduce GHG by 2050. Incentivizing the adoption of climate-friendly agricultural practices that focus on soil health – specifically increasing planting of cover crops and use of rotational grazing and reducing intensive tillage practices are cited in this report as key and impactful actions the state can take to meet Maine’s climate change goals.

If passed, LD 437 creates a statewide soil health program poised to support and advance the continued efforts of Maine’s agricultural community to adopt these practices while stewarding the land and feeding residents across the state. Establishing a Maine Healthy Soils Program also provides an opportunity to leverage more federal funds from the United States Department of Agriculture – National Resource Conservation Services and regional partners to expand healthy soil practices and other essential conservation practices.

The healthy soils program components that are described in section 2 of LD 437 are practical, impactful, and based upon methods proven to be successful in advancing the adoption of healthy soil practices. Farmers surveyed on barriers to the adoption of healthy soil practices have cited cost share/incentive programs, free technical assistance, and peer information sources such as experienced farmers within their network as the top factors that could influence their likelihood of adopting healthy soil practices.¹

¹Conservation Technology Information Center, North Central Region SARE, & American Seed Trade Association. 2017. Report of the 2016-17 National Cover Crop Survey. West Lafayette, IN. Available https://www.ctic.org/files/2017CTIC_CoverCropReport-FINAL.pdf

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Farmer peer-to-peer learning opportunities have been demonstrated to foster community and regional diffusion of innovations, from new technologies to conservation practices.²

The benefits of implementing a statewide healthy soils program for Maine's agricultural producers are far-reaching. from increasing farm productivity to improving farmland resiliency. However, these benefits extend far beyond agriculture, as healthy soils provide ecosystem services that are essential for all of Maine's residents and include such benefits as:

- increased drought, flood, and heat resilience through improved water infiltration and retention;
- water quality protection through reduced soil erosion and reduced nutrient and sediment pollution in surface waters and coastal ecosystems;
- reduced dependence on fertilizer through increased nutrient retention; and
- greater biodiversity and biological activity leading to increased decomposition of pesticides and organic contaminants and reduced pesticide contamination.

The establishment of a Maine Healthy Soils Program will advance the adoption of healthy soils practices across the state. With greater state support, as detailed in LD 437, Maine's agricultural community will have increased opportunities to understand and implement these practices – combating climate change, improving Maine's water quality and quantity, advancing farmland's resilience to extreme weather, and increasing the profitability of Maine's farms.

To conclude American Farmland Trust supports the state's efforts to implement a statewide healthy soils program. We strongly urge you to support and pass LD 437. Thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony.

American Farmland Trust is an agricultural non-profit organization with a mission to save the land that sustains us by protecting farmland, promoting sound farming practices, and keeping farmers on the land. AFT is the only national agricultural organization that approaches its work in this comprehensive, holistic manner. We recognize the connection between the land, forward-looking farming practices, and the farmers who do the work.

² Skaalsveen, K., Ingram, J., & Urquhart, J. (2020). The role of farmers' social networks in the implementation of no-till farming practices. *Agricultural Systems*, 181, 102824.