



MOFGA Testimony In Support Of
LD 782 - *An Act to Support Statewide Economic Opportunities Through Strategic Investments of Property and Funds, Including Emergency Relief Funds*
March 15, 2023

Good morning Senator Ingwersen, Representative Pluecker and members of the Joint Standing Committee on Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry. My name is Heather Spalding and I am deputy director of the Maine Organic Farmers and Gardeners Association (MOFGA).

A broad-based community, MOFGA is creating 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 535 organic farms and processing operations representing roughly \$90 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.

I am speaking in support of LD 782 - *An Act to Support Statewide Economic Opportunities Through Strategic Investments of Property and Funds, Including Emergency Relief Funds*. This bill would authorize the Commissioner of Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry (DACF) to apply for and accept emergency relief funds (as well as property) for the purpose of economic opportunity, business growth and other strategic investments. It allows the commissioner to hold hearings and adopt routine technical rules with respect to the implementation and administration of authorized grant or fund disbursement programs of the Department of Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry.

For decades, MOFGA farms have benefited from grants administered by the DACF. Programs such as the Maine Farms for the Future, Agricultural Development Grants, and the Agricultural Infrastructure Investment Program Grant (AIIP) are important examples of funding sources that have provided critical investments at just the right time for farms and processing operations to scale up and become more sustainable in Maine's agricultural economy.

The Maine Farms for the Future competitive grant program provides farms with business planning assistance and investment support so they can conduct research and strategic business planning to increase Farm Vitality, which is defined as, "an increase in long-term, maintainable, farm profitability and net worth." Scores of MOFGA farms have won competitive grants from the Farms for the Future program and many more would like to get that support.

Since 1999, MOFGA farms have been supported by the Department's Agricultural Development Grant Program, which provides cost-share grants to conduct market promotion, market research and development, value-added processing and new technology demonstration



projects. Many MOFGA farms have received grants ranging from \$10,000 to \$50,000. Each year we hear that the programs are oversubscribed.

The Agriculture Infrastructure Investment Program Grant (AIIP) provided \$20 million in critical infrastructure funding for Maine farms and agricultural food processors in order to mitigate the adverse effects of COVID-19, increase capacity, enhance supply chain resilience, address market disruptions, and drive growth within the Maine agricultural and food economy while providing more locally-available foods to Mainers. It was made possible by a one-time allocation of American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) federal funding through the Maine Jobs & Recovery Plan. It represented a huge investment in Maine's food economy, including many MOFGA-certified organic farms and processors some of whom received as much as \$250,000 or \$500,000. However, the awards were just a fraction of what was requested. There is an enormous demand for infrastructure investment throughout Maine's farm economy, and we know that the DACF is eager to secure additional funds and disseminate them to many worthy and ambitious farm and processing operations. While further funding through AIIP is not guaranteed, DACF is committed to advocating for additional support from other potential sources. Please ensure that DACF has the support and leeway it needs to act on behalf of our farmers.

These programs have provided critical funding, technical assistance, and infrastructure to help farms grow and bolster Maine's agricultural economy. There is an enormous demand for additional funding and the DACF should have the latitude it needs to go after resources to support the unmet needs.

As we have learned navigating the COVID-19 pandemic and the PFAS crisis, rapid dissemination of funding makes all the difference. We have heard repeatedly from farmers who said that if they hadn't had access to relief funding when they did, their operations wouldn't have survived. This is particularly true of the farms contaminated with PFAS. The DACF should be entrusted to administer grant programs, including appeals, in an efficient and fair manner. Thank you and I'd be happy to answer questions if you have any.

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 \$90 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.