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GOVERNOR

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August 30, 2023

Senate Agriculture Committee on
Agriculture, Nutrition and Forestry
328A Russell Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

House Committee on Agriculture
1301 Longworth House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

RE: Maine Farm Bill Priorities

Honorable Chairwoman Stabenow, Ranking Member Boozman, Chairman Thompson, and Ranking Member Scott:

My administration supports an equitable and robust Farm Bill that retains and, in key areas, expands funding to critical agriculture, nutrition, forestry, and conservation programs. Given the sweeping nature of the Farm Bill and the economic impacts on our state, its contents and passage are a high priority for my administration, and we are committed to supporting its most beneficial and ambitious outcomes.

In developing our Farm Bill priorities, my administration undertook a variety of outreach strategies to engage stakeholders in Maine, including:

- Conducting a statewide survey of agricultural producers, foresters, landowners, and service providers, including those representing the nutrition and emergency food system, for their firsthand feedback on programs most relevant to their needs in the Farm Bill and administered by the USDA.
- During the annual Maine Agricultural Trade Show, the Department of Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry (DACF) held a listening session to solicit farmers' and forestland owners' feedback on the Farm Bill.
- DACF also participated in a regional listening session in New York, attended several statewide listening sessions hosted by industry groups, and engaged in targeted outreach to additional landowners and service providers.



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- Through our engagement with the National Association of State Departments of Agriculture (NASDA), we also support the priorities articulated and endorsed by NASDA member states, which can be found [here](https://www.nasda.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/2023-Farm-Bill-one-pager.pdf):
<https://www.nasda.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/2023-Farm-Bill-one-pager.pdf>.
- Likewise, our recommendations have been informed by a Farm Bill roundtable discussion at the Northeast Association of State Departments of Agriculture (NEASDA) 2022 annual meeting and through joint discussions between NEASDA and the Association of Northeast Extension Directors.
- In addition, the Governor's Office of Policy, Innovation, and the Future solicited further input on nutrition and hunger priorities statewide.

Consistent with the robust input received, this letter outlines my administration's support for and recommendations related to numerous critical Farm Bill initiatives.

CLIMATE SMART AGRICULTURE & FORESTRY: Maine has committed to two key goals in its four-year climate action plan published in 2020, [Maine Won't Wait](#), that intersect with agriculture, conservation, and forestry: 1) to ensure that 30% of the food consumed in the state is produced in our state by 2030, and 2) to protect 30% of our natural and working lands by 2030. Consistent with these goals, we recommend the Farm Bill:

- Increase funding for critical farmland conservation programs, including the **Agriculture Conservation Easement Program**, the only federal program to reduce the loss of private working agricultural lands. The recently introduced *Farmland Access Act* makes several changes to the "Buy-Protect-Sell" program that my administration supports, such as increasing program funding to address growing development pressures on rural land.
- Protect and permanently dedicate the \$20 billion in climate-smart agriculture funding authorized by the *Inflation Reduction Act* and directed toward popular, effective conservation programs implemented through USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS).
- Support critical NRCS conservation programs for agriculture and forestry, including the **Environmental Quality Incentive Program (EQIP)**. EQIP funding should be available to producers implementing climate resiliency projects, including sustainable water source development and irrigation projects. Such funding is currently only available to improve existing irrigation/water sources. USDA should remove the requirement that well drilling systems are only reimbursable when a water line has been successfully tapped, as this creates a financial liability for the farmer. Additionally, EQIP's current match requirements often inhibit landowners' ability to apply and should be lowered.
- Include the *Small Farm Conservation Act*, which would streamline EQIP, USDA's flagship program that supports on-farm conservation, to make it easier for smaller farm businesses, including those operated by young and beginning farmers, to access financial support and technical assistance. The bill will strengthen the capacity of NRCS to meet the



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needs of Maine's small farms by funding dedicated staff and simplifying application processes within a newly created EQIP subprogram.

- Provide irrigation funding through state block grants. Extreme weather events, including drought, are occurring at greater frequency, impeding Maine's ability to meet its agricultural production goals. Existing NRCS funding for irrigation does not meet the demand, and state block funding would supplement this funding source.
- Increase support for on-the-ground technical assistance within USDA farmer and forester programs that help landowners develop adaptation and mitigation strategies in response to a changing climate. As new programs and funding opportunities emerge, resources for technical assistance should be made available so landowners can have the support to apply for and implement these programs properly.
- Provide invasive species mitigation funding through **State and Private Forestry Programs** to support outreach and response to infestations and funding for genetic research to promote climate-resilient species. Funding to control invasives is becoming increasingly important in response to climate change.
- Support block grants for states that have built soil health programming. Improved soil health is a resiliency strategy key to reducing climate risk. Recommendations for allocating these block grants are included in the *Agriculture Resilience Act (ARA)*. The ARA also includes common-sense reforms to popular working lands conservation programs, such as EQIP and the Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP), and other climate-smart agriculture policy solutions.

PFAS SUPPORT: Given Maine's experience creating a first-in-the-nation comprehensive, multi-agency PFAS response effort specific to agriculture, we understand the need for federal action to support PFAS-impacted farmers and communities. We recommend strong federal interagency leadership and collaboration to support PFAS mitigation and response efforts. Agencies, including EPA, USDA, FDA, and CDC, must work together to establish a universal response framework that supports farmers and protects human health and the environment while minimizing impacts on interstate commerce. We recommend:

- Including the *Relief for Farmers Hit with PFAS Act* as part of the Farm Bill, which will help establish a federal safety net for PFAS-impacted farmers.
- Ensuring that existing federal programs can rapidly support impacted farms while they employ strategies to reduce or eliminate PFAS exposure over time and work toward ensuring future farm viability. Maine's PFAS response program has helped some farms successfully reduce or eliminate contamination; PFAS detection at a farm doesn't necessarily mean the farm must permanently close. The following federal programs should not exclude but instead expand to support PFAS-contaminated farms and farmland:



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NRCS's Agricultural Conservation Easement Program (ACEP), Conservation Reserve Program (CRP), EQIP, Rural Energy for America Program (REAP).

- Supporting the *Healthy H2O Act* to enable low-income households facing water quality challenges in their homes to afford reliable water filtration technologies.
- Funding to support replacing firefighting gear such as certain foams and protective gear known to contain PFAS.

LOCAL AND REGIONAL FOOD SYSTEMS: Maine and the nation need a food system that strengthens rural economies everywhere, one that is more resilient and reliable in the face of shocks caused by climate change, a pandemic, globally or politically-influenced market forces, or other disruptors. We support:

- USDA programming that addresses barriers to access and ensures programs are inclusive and equitable for all people, including but not limited to socially disadvantaged farmers and beginning and veteran farmers.
- Investments in land access, retention, and transition for farmers including through the *Increasing Land, Security, and Opportunities Act* which provides flexible support to farmers in accessing land, capital, and markets.
- Continued support for land grant institution programs, including increased base funding for Cooperative Extension and agricultural research stations. Farmers, in particular, rely heavily on land grant university staff who conduct on-the-ground educational and research services that are ever more important as climate change progresses.
- Reauthorize and increase funding for the **Farm and Ranch Stress Assistance Network (FRSAN)**, a program that connects farmers, ranchers, and other agriculture workers to stress assistance programs and resources. This is included in *The Farmers First Act of 2023*.
- Increased funding for the **Specialty Crop Block Grant Program (SCBGP)**. Since 2002, the SCBGP has awarded over \$6.5 million to DACF to support the growing number of specialty crop producers selling into local and regional markets. This recommendation is included in the *Specialty Crop Security Act*.
- Increased funding for the **Local Access and Marketing Program (LAMP)**, which helps develop, coordinate, and expand direct producer-to-consumer marketing, local and regional food markets and enterprises, and value-added agricultural products. Aquacultural producers are also eligible for this program. This recommendation is included in the *Local Farms and Food Act*.
- Ongoing funding for the **Resilient Food System Infrastructure Program (RFSI)**. DACF's experience with our ARPA-funded Agriculture Infrastructure Investment Program (AIIP) provides dramatic evidence that ongoing funding for agriculture infrastructure



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investments is critical for Maine's agricultural economy. In 2021, Maine allocated \$20 million in ARPA funding to be administered as grants by DACF through AIIP. Farmers and food processors submitted approximately 850 proposals totaling nearly \$180 million in requests, demonstrating a demand that far outpaced available funding. We greatly appreciate the \$3.9 million RFSI funds awarded to Maine, but we are cognizant that the gap between needs and available resources is still vast.

- Increased funding for the **Market Access Program (MAP)** and **Foreign Market Development Program (FMD)**, included in the *Expanding Agricultural Exports Act*. These programs have opened new markets for agriculture and businesses outside of the U.S.
- Continued support for the four regional USDA **Dairy Business Innovation Initiatives**, which offer critical grants and services to dairy farmers, processors, and service providers to create resiliency and long-term sustainability for dairy businesses.
- Continued support for the **Dairy Margin Coverage Program**, including reducing the high premium costs to allow more producers to afford enrollment. This program provides risk management coverage for dairy producers when the difference between the national milk price and the average feed cost falls below a certain level.
- Increased USDA's focus on aquaculture. Aquaculture is one of the fastest-growing food production methods in the world and is a form of agriculture. This is included in the *Sustaining Healthy Ecosystems, Livelihoods and Local Seafood Act (SHELLS Act)* through the creation of a program office that would reside within USDA, would promote blue carbon ecosystems, protect food security, and bolster shellfish and seaweed farmers.
- Continued support for the **Regional Food Business Center Program (RFBC)**, which provides technical assistance needed to access new markets and federal, state, and local resources, and assists small- and mid-sized producers in overcoming barriers to market access, with a focus on underserved farmers, ranchers, and food businesses.
- Allowing the **Rural Development Section 514/516 Farm Labor Housing Program (FLH)** to include broader worker eligibility. In Maine and across the country, farm labor continues to be one of the most significant challenges facing the agricultural community.
- H2-A reform that supports a flexible, efficient, and streamlined visa program. It is estimated that half of the U.S. agricultural workforce is foreign-born. Some of these proposals are included in the *Farm Workforce Modernization Act*.
- Funding the **Organic Research and Extension Initiative (OREI)**. OREI helps solve critical organic agriculture issues through research, education, and extension activities. This program, included in the *Strengthening Organic Agriculture Research Act*, enhances the ability of organic producers and processors to grow and market high-quality organic agricultural products.



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- Expanding local processing and market opportunities by increasing the federal cost share for state facility inspections for Cooperative Interstate Shipment facilities. **The Cooperative Interstate Shipment Program (CIS)** promotes the expansion of business opportunities for state-inspected meat and poultry establishments, and reducing the cost share can encourage more participation. This recommendation is included in the *Strengthening Local Processing Act*.
- Ensuring that the **Risk Management Agency (RMA)** develops programs and policies that work for small and diversified farms throughout New England. Crop insurance cannot be a one-size-fits-all solution for farms that need specialized and unique policies.
- Repealing a federal provision barring individuals with certain felony drug-related convictions within the past ten years from obtaining a license to grow hemp, which is included in the *Free to Grow Act*.
- Amending the federal definition of hemp to increase the total THC concentration to one percent or less. Increasing the THC concentration would enable farmers to plant more seed varieties. This approach retains limits on THC concentration while providing greater assurance to farmers that their crop will be viable.
- Funding research, development, and implementation of labor-saving automation and mechanization technologies, specifically within the **Specialty Crop Mechanization and Automation Research and Development Program**.

FORESTRY/CONSERVATION: Maine's forests encompass 89% of the state's land base. Our forests have been critical to Maine's economy for centuries, providing jobs and driving innovation while also playing an essential role in sequestering carbon. We support:

- Full funding for the **Forest Legacy Program (FLP)**. Maine is the national leader in acres conserved through the FLP. Since 1994, Maine has received more than \$85 million and has permanently protected by fee or easement over 775,000 acres of Maine's forest to sustain Maine's forest and recreational economies. Continued utilization of this program will be critical to meeting Maine's climate action plan goal to protect 30% of our natural and working lands by 2030.
- Increasing resources to states implementing projects funded by the **Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF)**. This fund supports outstanding opportunities for outdoor recreation. More than 900 state and local conservation and recreation projects in Maine have received LWCF funding, including 37 state parks and all 12 of Maine's state park campgrounds. Although the *Great American Outdoors Act* permanently authorized funding for LWCF, it did not include support for critical stateside administration resources needed to steward the program. Like FLP, LWCF funding will be key to achieving our state's conservation and climate goals while also helping to address the increasing interest in outdoor recreation in Maine.



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- Full funding for the **Forest Inventory and Analysis Program (FIA)**, which is essential to monitoring the health of our forests.
- Codifying State Forest Action Plan implementation authority to allow Maine the flexibility to continue employing the highest priority forest management activities within our state. Currently, the *Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act* (IIJA/BIL) provides funding for broad and flexible implementation and promotion of the State Forest Action Plan (SFAP).
- Increased funding for the USFS **Reforestation, Nurseries, and Genetic Resources Program** (RNGR) to significantly expand native seed propagation and seedling production to support conservation, reforestation, and forest-based climate objectives.
- Promotion of cross-boundary wildfire mitigation within **State and Private Forestry** funding by providing grants to state foresters for hazardous fuel reduction projects that cross land ownership boundaries. Wildfires don't heed political boundaries, and broader cooperation is becoming increasingly important as we see more extreme heat patterns and larger wildfires. This is an essential tool in ecological restoration, building forest resilience, and addressing wildfire challenges.
- Expanding the **Healthy Forest Reserve Program (HFR)** by including the **Forest Conservation Easement Program (FCEP)**, modeled after ACEP, in a manner that ensures funding does not detract from current critical conservation programs within the USDA.
- Reauthorizing the **Community Wood Energy and Wood Innovation Program** and lifting the 5MW project-size cap for combined heat and power projects. This will qualify high-performance wood-fueled energy systems for competitive grants, thus helping applicants overcome the high capital cost of these systems.
- Reauthorizing the **Advanced Biofuel Payment Program**, which provides production incentives for wood pellet manufacturing. Maine has four commercial producers of this sustainable, advanced biofuel, and these incentive payments have helped manufacturers compete with heavily subsidized fossil fuels.
- Creating a federal safety net for forest landowners to recover, reforest and remain in production, much like crop insurance. This recommendation is included in the *Disaster Reforestation Act* (DRA).
- Creating a forest and wood products program that measures and tracks carbon across the supply chain, establishes a wood design education accelerator program for U.S. colleges and universities, expands the **Wood Innovation Grant Program (WIG)** to scale the use of mass timber, and creates a rural infrastructure pilot program that utilizes American-grown wood to benefit underserved communities. This recommendation is included in the *Timber Innovation for Building Rural Communities Act*.

NUTRITION/HUNGER: Maine envisions a state free from hunger, where everyone has the economic resources to secure consistent and easy access to enough healthy, culturally appropriate



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food for an active and healthy life. In 2019, under my administration, we committed the state to end hunger by 2030 through the *Everyone at the Table* roadmap. To support our efforts, we recommend the following:

- Increase benefits for the **Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP)**. This essential program ensures Maine people have food on their tables. When SNAP benefits were rolled back to pre-pandemic levels, Maine families lost \$17 million monthly in nutrition support. This is despite need not changing and significant inflation. Congress could achieve this by replacing the *Thrifty Food Plan with the Low- or- Moderate-Cost Food Plan*.
- Allow flexibility for **Summer EBT** enrollment by allowing states with their own school meal for all programs to use that information to confer eligibility for this new program.
- Enacting critical changes to SNAP, including eligibility requirements, so that more food-insecure people may benefit. Forty-three percent of food-insecure Mainers do not qualify for SNAP benefits. We recommend ending the prohibition on the use of SNAP benefits to purchase hot prepared foods from food retailers, as not all SNAP recipients are housed or have access to a kitchen; eliminating the five-year waiting period for legal, permanent immigrants to access SNAP and other federal programs; and ending SNAP's arbitrary three-month time limit on individuals ages 18-50 not living with children to ensure that all eligible people have consistent access to nutrition assistance.
- Dedicating additional funding to **The Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP)**. DACF currently collaborates with over 250 participating organizations to combat food insecurity in Maine. Additional TEFAP funding will not compensate for the recent decrease in SNAP benefits and its impact on household resources. Reliant on volunteer staffing, Maine food pantries often have limited food variety and hours and can be challenging for families to access, given geographic, scheduling, and transportation issues. The lack of adequate refrigeration and freezer space at some pantries can also result in less available fresh produce, fresh and frozen meats, eggs, and dairy.
- Permanently authorizing and funding the **Universal School Meals Program** to end school childhood hunger. While various efforts were made to bolster and extend the program since 2020, it expired in September 2022, leaving nearly 30 million children who rely on free or reduced-price lunches in a state of uncertainty. This is included in the *Universal School Meals Program Act of 2023*. Maine passed the School Meals For All legislation in 2022/2023, providing school meals at no cost to students.
- Sustaining the **Reach & Resiliency Grant Initiative** via TEFAP has allowed for investments in Maine's ever-fragile emergency and charitable food system. Maine's TEFAP network relies on over 250 community organizations as distribution points where food-insecure families can access food. This Initiative prioritizes remote, rural, and tribal areas comprising much of Maine's geography.



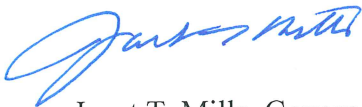
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- Strengthening and expanding the **Gus Schumacher Nutrition Incentive Program** (GusNIP, formerly FINI) by increasing funding and reducing the match requirement as included in the *Local Farms and Food Act*.
- Expanding mandatory funding for the **Farm to School Program**, including reducing the barriers to applying for the grant program, such as modifying the match requirement.
- Making the **Local Food Purchase Assistance Cooperative Agreement (LFPA)** permanent. In Maine, LFPA has the dual positive impact of generating new revenue streams for small and underserved producers while supporting nutrition security for Maine's most vulnerable families. More than 90% of our \$2.6 million goes directly to our LFPA network of close to 150 small and socially disadvantaged producers.
- Supporting programs that facilitate compost and food waste reduction included in the *Compost Act*. We also support creating a food waste office at the USDA, building on the food waste liaison established in the 2018 Farm Bill. Excessive food waste is a significant contributor to climate change and food injustice, as hundreds of thousands of children and adults lack sufficient access to healthy, quality food. An astounding 40% of the food produced in the United States is wasted, which also means that the inputs (some of which are finite) to produce that food are also wasted.

My administration greatly appreciates the hard work of your committee and the work of Maine's congressional delegation, who help champion this critical piece of legislation. In particular, I am grateful that members of the House Agriculture Committee recently visited Maine and held a listening session where they heard from many Maine stakeholders firsthand about numerous issues I have touched on in this letter. I hope the time spent here inspired and informed the members in a way that helps produce a final Farm Bill benefitting the people of Maine and the nation as a whole.

Please do not hesitate to contact me or my staff for further information as these critical discussions continue.

Sincerely,



Janet T. Mills, Governor

Cc: Senator Susan Collins
 Senator Angus King
 Representative Chellie Pingree
 Representative Jared Golden
 USDA Secretary of Agriculture Tom Vilsack



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