



MOFGA Testimony In Support Of  
*LD 901 - Resolve, to Establish a Pilot Project to Support Farm Apprenticeships in Maine*

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.

MOFGA appreciates the opportunity to advocate today for this bill to help develop the next generation of Maine farm workers and ensure that they have the knowledge and skills to sustain a vibrant and healthy Maine agriculture.

Over the past few months, MOFGA has participated in discussions about various approaches to enhancing the state's farm worker training programs. One approach we were excited about was the possibility of procuring funding through Maine's Registered Apprenticeship program. Unfortunately, the parameters of that program are quite difficult to apply to the farm sector due to much of it being seasonal. The Registered Apprenticeship Program requires 2000 hours per year of supervised on-the-job learning. We had hoped that the Department of Labor would consider a variation on the theme geared toward seasonal employment, not only for the farming sector but also, potentially, for the tourism sector, which also is in great need of workers who can assume greater responsibilities. The Department of Labor was not interested in that approach so we thought that a pilot project administered by the Department of Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry would be a reasonable alternative.

The problem that we are trying to solve is the ever-increasing need for farm workers who have the skills and knowledge base to take on management roles and provide much needed support for Maine farms.

According to USDA's 2017 Census of Agriculture, Maine had: 2,230 farms with hired labor; 13,440 hired farm workers; 400 farms with 5 – 9 hired workers, employing a total of 2,541 workers; and 335 farms with 10+ workers, employing a total of 7,854 workers. Overall, farms



employing at least 5 workers accounted for 77.3% of hired farm workers. These figures likely have changed significantly since the last Agricultural Census and given the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on the overall workforce. Agriculture is facing a serious shortage of workers and we need to think about ways to make the farm worker jobs more attractive and rewarding.

This bill would provide mentorship funding for farmers with at least 5 years of experience as an owner, manager or operator of a farm; a defined list of education and training for an apprentice; a plan to hire an apprentice for at least 12 weeks; housing or a housing stipend; and assurance of compensation at or above the state minimum wage. The pilot program funds would support mentorship for 25 apprenticeships at \$5,000 each – total \$125,000.

Since the early 1970s, MOFGA has hosted a variety of successful farm training programs designed to help farmers of all levels achieve their goals. We offer different opportunities for apprentices who are seeking a beginning experience with agriculture, farmers in the very early stages of their careers, and farmers in years 5-9 who wish to address critical challenges they're facing at this stage of farm development. Congresswoman Chellie Pingree was MOFGA's first farm apprentice, working on Hillside Farm in Camden in 1974. She helped formalize the apprenticeship program in 1975 and, since then, we have well over a thousand apprentices participate. As a result of the excellent mentorship from farmers, any of those apprentices have gone on to establish thriving organic farms of their own, and continued the tradition of mentoring apprentices.

MOFGA serves as a matchmaker and, though we have clear expectations of the host farmers, we leave it up to the mentor and apprentice to work out an agreeable contract. Our vision of farm apprenticeship includes education and relationship building; equity and inclusivity; environmental sustainability; safety and fairness. Host farmers agree to share their experience and knowledge in all aspects of their farm on a regular basis, scheduling regular check-ins to support the growth of the beginning farmer and build a relationship of mutual respect that may extend beyond the length of the apprenticeship. The host farm agrees to support their apprentice in accessing MOFGA's educational programming geared toward apprentices. Prior to mentoring apprentices, host farmers are encouraged to acknowledge their own perspective including assumptions, privileges, and biases that may affect an apprentice's experience on their farm. MOFGA expects host farmers to support a more equitable and just food system for all and work towards creating a more inclusive farm learning and working environment for beginning farmers that are historically and currently under-supported in agriculture. This includes but is not limited to women, people of color, LGBTQIA+ individuals, veterans, low-income individuals, people of diverse religious and non-religious affiliations, immigrants, and asylum seekers. MOFGA expects host farmers to be farming in an environmentally sustainable manner and provide relevant training, and to compensate apprentices fairly and justly, showing respect for the labor and service provided by the apprentice.

Our experience shows that apprenticeship has huge benefits to farm workers interested in pursuing a life of farming, to host farms who need dependable, skilled and knowledgeable workers, and the broader agricultural sector that needs more farm workers and more farms. We would love to see more Maine farmers embracing the model of apprenticeship and we feel that this pilot project would be a great way to help prospective farm workers and farmers experience the apprenticeship model.

Given that this pilot program focuses on sustainability of farm businesses as well as ecologically sound farming practices, we feel that the DACF's Healthy Soils Program might be a logical place for the pilot project to live.

We hope that you will support this pilot program.

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.*