MOFGA Testimony In Support Of
LD 1227- *An Act to Balance Renewable Energy Development with Natural and Working Lands Conservation*
April 10, 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 the amended version of LD 1227- *An Act to Balance Renewable Energy Development with Natural and Working Lands Conservation*. This bill directs the Department of Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry (DACF), collaborating with other state offices, to develop a dual-use pilot program plan to test and study the efficacy and potential benefits of solar energy systems located on active farmland and connected to the electric transmission and distribution utility system. It also establishes a publicly accessible database of renewable energy facilities to identify land use trends.

MOFGA enthusiastically supports efforts to protect Maine farmland and keep it in agricultural production, while finding ways to reduce energy consumption and convert our fossil-fuel-based energy system to renewables. Maine's precious and finite farmland is threatened by commercial and residential developments, dramatically changing weather patterns, and synthetic chemical contamination, so we must do everything we can to minimize impact from other industrial developments including solar farms.

The most recent USDA Census of Agriculture indicated that between 2012 and 2017 Maine lost 10% of its farmland – representing more than 145,000 acres of pastureland, cropland, and woodland.[1] Maine can and should be self-reliant with its food supply. We need to put more land into agricultural production if we hope to achieve our climate action plan goal for reducing food miles by supporting local farms.[2]

[1] United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), National Agricultural Statistics Service (NASS), U.S. Census of Agriculture for 2017, Maine.
[2] Maine Won't Wait: A four-year plan for climate action sets a goal of increasing the amount of food consumed in Maine from state food producers from 10% to 20% by 2025 and 30% by 2030 through local food system development.

We know that MOFGA farmers already are feeling the pressure of hayfields being sacrificed to solar arrays. We recognize that renewable energy systems like 20-100 megawatt solar arrays take up a lot of space (100 to 500 acres) that could be used for other important climate challenges like wildlife habitat, and carbon sequestering fields and forests. We believe that future projects must be assessed based not only on ratepayer benefits, but also on whether the projects avoid or minimize natural resource or agricultural impacts. We want to ensure responsible assessment of how solar arrays can be added to farm and open space tax programs, so that Maine's prime agricultural lands are protected for farming generations to come.

We are grateful to the Agricultural Solar Siting Stakeholder Group for their efforts to develop consensus recommendations on siting of solar energy projects, and we believe that the amended version of LD 1227 lays out a plan to minimize adverse impacts to valuable agricultural lands. Important recommendations include:

- Narrowing the definition of "dual-use" project to mean a mixed-use system combining agricultural production with solar energy production.
- Authorizing DACF to accept public or private funding and hire professional contractors to carry out a feasibility study, and to work with the Governor's Energy Office to implement the program.
- Maintaining the minimum project capacity of 20 megawatts and increasing the maximum to 60 megawatts.

MOFGA is striving to create an agriculture where farmers are helping mitigate climate change while making a good living that allows them to support their families and our communities. We are working to build a future where every Maine child, regardless of race, religion, gender identity, geography or socioeconomic status comes home to plenty of healthy local, organic food. This will only happen if Maine's agricultural sector is thriving economically, with healthy soils and renewable, affordable and appropriately located energy systems.

Thank you very much and I would be happy to answer questions if you have any.

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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.