



Testimony Submitted to the Joint Standing Committee on Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry

in support of

LD 870, Resolve, Directing the Permanent Commission on the Status of Racial, Indigenous and Maine Tribal Populations To Study the Impact of Policies Regarding Agriculture, Access to Land, Access to Grants and Access to Financing on African-American and Indigenous Farmers in the State

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Senator Dill, Representative O'Neil, and Distinguished Members of the Joint Standing Committee on Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry:

My name is Amy Winston and I live in Edgecomb. I am the State Policy Director at Coastal Enterprises, Inc. (CEI), and am testifying on behalf of CEI **in support of LD 870**, "*Resolve, Directing the Permanent Commission on the Status of Racial, Indigenous and Maine Tribal Populations To Study the Impact of Policies Regarding Agriculture, Access to Land, Access to Grants and Access to Financing on African-American and Indigenous Farmers in the State.*"

As you know, LD 870 directs Maine's Permanent Commission on the Status of Racial, Indigenous and Maine Tribal Populations to study the impact of Maine agriculture policy, including policies that have structured and determined access to land, access to grants and access to capital, on African American and indigenous farmers in Maine. This research will enable relevant state agencies, including the Department of Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry, to take the necessary steps to create equity and restore diversity in Maine farming and food production, by outreaching to socially disadvantaged populations and addressing internal capacities for strengths and gaps in this area.

Discrimination against farmers of color has resulted in their loss of land and significant industry attrition that have had damaging health and economic consequences in Black and indigenous communities and communities of color, nationwide. The number of Black farmers in the U.S. declined from one million in 1920 to 50,000 today. To redress the legacy of past and ongoing discrimination, the United States Department of Agriculture codified and allocated technical and financial support for Socially Disadvantaged Farmers and Ranchers. In the late 1800s, the percentage of Maine residents who were Black exceeded that of today. We know that there were entire communities of people who were forced off their land (for example, in Peterborough, in what is now the Town of Warren). We know of the history of dispossession among Maine's Indigenous people, and how that history has limited their access to farmable land. We further know that Indigenous farmers have faced barriers accessing farm assistance and insurance programs. We also know that Maine has a sizable population of migrant farm



workers, and there is an opportunity to outreach to farm workers of diverse backgrounds to promote and support their transition to entrepreneurship, to promote viable farm and food-related businesses.

While USDA is working to reduce structural barriers that farmers of color experience as members of groups that have been subjected to racial and ethnic prejudice, states are beginning to take similar steps to create equity in this sector - in both representation and decision-making regarding access to agricultural programs, including grants and technical assistance, land, and financing. This bill provides a path for Maine to align its policy with other states and with federal efforts to create equitable access to these resources. The economic benefit of supporting racial equity in food and farming will be felt statewide, with improved health and nutrition in Black and indigenous communities and communities of color, and increased entrepreneurship among diverse and historically underserved farmers and food producers.

A traceable, sustainable, climate-safe food supply is central to Maine's 10-year Economic Development Plan. DECD is working to ensure the plan's success by collaborating with the Permanent Commission. The Commission is a wonderful asset that can help the legislature and state government with this effort. It is the state's responsibility to carefully consider and implement Commission recommendations. CEI's President, Keith Bisson, is a member of the Commission. Established by the Legislature to examine racial disparities and improve outcomes for historically disadvantaged racial and tribal populations in Maine, the Commission has recommended that Maine "institutionalize a process to examine legislation through a racial equity lens."

This bill proposes to compensate the commission for undertaking detailed analysis of the adverse and residual effects of Maine's agricultural policies and the potential to support farmers from populations that have lacked access to land and equipment – the basics needed to farm viably.

This is important to CEI. As one of more than a thousand community development financial institutions (CDFIs) working for economic, social, and environmental justice nation-wide, we are dedicated to working in partnership with organizations, businesses, legislators and communities to advance equitable opportunity and create an economy that lifts all people. Nearly 80 percent of our business financing and advice goes to enterprises led by or creating opportunities for people with low incomes or in communities with low incomes. This bill would provide the state an opportunity to analyze the economic and other benefits of policies that increase parity in the food and agriculture industries.

Thank you for considering this testimony in support of LD 870. Please do not hesitate to contact me if you have questions or would like additional information about CEI and our efforts to promote shared prosperity.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Amy Winston".

Amy Winston
State Policy Director