



Testimony to the Joint Standing Committee on Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry
in support of
LD 856, An Act to Balance Renewable Energy Development with Natural and Working Lands
Conservation
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Senator Dill, Representative O'Neil, and Members of the Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry Committee:

My name is Amy Winston. I live in Edgecomb. I am testifying, as state policy director, in support of LD 856, on behalf of [Coastal Enterprises, Inc. \(CEI\)](#) and CEI's subsidiary, [Bright Community Capital \(BCC\)](#). CEI is a non-profit, mission-driven community development financial institution (CDFI). CEI helps to grow good jobs, environmentally sustainable enterprises, and shared prosperity in Maine and other rural regions by integrating financing, business and industry expertise, and policy solutions. We envision a world in which communities are economically and environmentally healthy, enabling all people, especially those with low incomes, to reach their full potential. BCC was founded by CEI to expand access to solar energy production in rural and low-income communities through installations on affordable housing, community facilities, and municipal buildings.

Through loan and equity financing, CEI and BCC have financed more than 30 solar rooftop systems and arrays in Maine totaling over 28 million kWh, enough to power 2,600 households. Almost 20% of these Maine-based solar loans have been to farm enterprises that are using solar to offset their energy costs. In addition to financing the development of renewable energy, CEI has a long history of financing and championing agriculture and food-related businesses in Maine, including managing close to \$40MM in federal Cares and ARPA grant funds in partnership with DACF. We support policies that preserve working landscapes, such as a bill we advanced last session that established an investment fund to strengthen the agriculture, food, and forest products economy¹. We support LD 856 as it aligns with the state's 10-year economic development strategy and takes a comprehensive approach to balancing both agriculture and energy related land use and development.

CEI is also a member of the Governor's Energy Office Distributed Generation Stakeholder Group. We strongly support and are ready to participate with other DG stakeholder group members and our natural resource agency and stakeholder peers in the siting work sessions that are proposed in the bill. The careful work and thoughtful recommendations of Maine's Agricultural Solar Stakeholder Group - which was a product of Maine's Climate Action Plan - are reflected in this bill. We agree that an inclusive and transparent process, as proposed, will help Maine establish clear guidelines for siting and developing dual-use projects.

¹ The Maine Agriculture, Food & Forest Products Investment Fund was established under LD 1733 (P.L. 2021, ch. 483, §§ KK-1-3), "An Act To Provide Allocations for the Distribution of State Fiscal Recovery Funds."



It is essential that Maine's distributed generation energy policy incorporate land use considerations, including impacts and incentives, into solar development and holistic grid planning to achieve Maine's long-term decarbonization and electrification goals. Our state must be proactive in understanding the potential roles of prime farmland and soil to not only produce food and support local economies, but also to aid in the decarbonization of our state economy. Dual-use projects present an opportunity to work at this nexus of food, water, and energy security and we applaud the creation of a pilot program to promote this activity in Maine. It is critical that these two sectors, agricultural production and renewable energy development, are deliberately intertwined in policy to preserve, enhance, and add value to Maine's natural resource industries, our state's enduring cultural and economic assets. We support the creation of a publicly accessible database and a new staff position at the GEO (established in Section 3 of the bill) to facilitate these intentional land use and energy development decisions.

We also applaud the creation of a staff position at the DACF to provide technical assistance to municipalities in these matters and respectfully suggest that the committee consider expanding technical assistance beyond municipalities considering utility-scale applications and making it available to landowners or producers, who might benefit from outside guidance when considering the development of their land.

Thank you for considering our testimony. We urge the committee to pass this bill and look forward to supporting dual-use policy and development. Please do not hesitate to contact me or Niels Zellers at BCC, Niels.Zellers@brightcommcap.com, for more information or if you have any questions.