

**Maine Agriculture, Food and Forest Products Infrastructure Fund
Advisory Board Meeting
Wednesday, March 26, 2025; 1:00 – 2:30 pm**

[AFFPIF Webpage](#)

Please register for the Zoom meeting here:

https://mainestate.zoom.us/meeting/register/MdkqBZbUQVqzFv_Kj4cdxg

Desired Outcomes - By the end of this meeting, we will have:

- Learned from and discussed the Agricultural Infrastructure Investment Program analysis and Resilient Food System Infrastructure Program listening session takeaways to inform the Investment Fund design
- Learned from and discussed an analysis of the existing funding landscape to inform the Investment Fund design
- Agreed on meeting schedule details
- Provided an opportunity for public input

Agenda

What	When
Welcome and Agenda Review	1:00 – 1:05
AIIP Analysis and RFSI Listening Session Learnings – Claire Hawkins, DACF	1:05 – 1:40
Existing Funding Landscape – Erica Campbell, InCommon Group	1:40 – 2:15
Public Input	2:15 – 2:20
Meeting Format Decision	
Next Meeting: Wednesday, April 30, 1 – 2:30 pm, Zoom	2:20 – 2:30

Note: Agenda item times are subject to change based on the progress of the group

Maine Agriculture, Food, and Forest Products Infrastructure Fund Advisory Board Members

Board Member	Affiliation	Seat Description
Craig Hickman (Co-Chair)	Annabessacook Farm	Historically underserved racial populations in nondairy farming
Tricia Rouleau (Co-Chair)	Maine Farmland Trust	Statewide industry group representing conventional nondairy farming
Amanda Beal	Commissioner, DACF	Commissioner DACF or designee
Jay Beck	FAME	Financial institutions with experience in the agricultural and forest products industry
Matt Chin	Harvesting Good	Supply chain in processing, mfg or distribution
Marada Cook	Crown o'Maine	Supply chain in processing, mfg or distribution
Dana Doran	Professional Logging Contractors	Statewide group representing logging and trucking industry
Shannon Hill	Mi'kmaq Farms	Member of a federally recognized Indian nation, tribe, or band
Heather Johnson	Commissioner, DECD	Commissioner DECD or designee
Muhidin Libah	Liberation Farms	Historically underserved racial populations in nondairy farming
Nicolas Lindholm	MOFGA	Statewide industry group representing organic nondairy farming
Jameson Little	Farm Credit East	Financial institutions with experience in the agricultural and forest products industry
Sarah Littlefield	Maine Dairy Promotion Board	Statewide industry group representing dairy producers
Krysta West	Maine Forest Products Council	Statewide industry group representing forest products industry
Amy Winston	CEI	Provider of mktg assistance, mkt development, or business and financial planning
Jeffrey Wolovitz	Heiwa Tofu	Mfg of value-added products or representative of the value-added agricultural products industry
		Mfg of forest products

Agriculture, Food and Forest Products Infrastructure Fund Advisory Board Working Agreements

- Meetings will start and end on time.
- When meetings are held in person, Advisory Board members will make every effort to attend in person to maximize learning, communication, and collaboration.
- Cameras will remain on during virtual meetings to facilitate communication and understanding.
- Meeting materials will be shared in advance of meetings with sufficient time for review.
- Come prepared, having read meeting materials and completed assignments.
- Be present and engaged.
- Strive for equal airtime, enabling all to participate fully.
- Listen with curiosity and an openness to learning and understanding.
- Adopt a creative problem-solving orientation.
- Name the tension, kindly.
- Humor is welcome!

The Advisory Board will strive for consensus in its deliberations through a facilitated, discussion-based process. It will not hold votes on program design decisions. The Advisory Board will shift to a voting system as the Fund begins grantmaking.

§320-A. Agriculture, food system and forest products infrastructure investment

1. Definitions. As used in this chapter, unless the context otherwise indicates, the following terms have the following meanings.

A. "Food system" means all processes, infrastructure and persons involved in feeding a population, including growing, harvesting, collecting, processing, manufacturing, packaging, transporting, marketing, selling, consuming and disposing of food and food-related items in the State. [PL 2021, c. 483, Pt. KK, §2 (NEW).]

B. "Infrastructure" means property, equipment, networks and supporting services associated with the production, harvesting, processing, manufacturing, storage, packaging, transporting, marketing, sales and disposal of food. [PL 2021, c. 483, Pt. KK, §2 (NEW).]

C. "Producer" means a person in the State that grows, manufactures, harvests or otherwise creates agricultural, food or forest products and value-added products, including a person engaged in farming, harvesting or other agricultural and forestry manufacturing activities. [PL 2021, c. 483, Pt. KK, §2 (NEW).]

D. "Supply chain" means the chain of distribution by which agricultural, food and forest products are moved from the producer to the consumer and may include intermediate entities, including aggregators of various products, manufacturers, value-added producers, processors, packagers, warehouse operators and other storage entities, distributors, wholesalers and retailers. [PL 2021, c. 483, Pt. KK, §2 (NEW).]

E. "Value-added" means changing the physical state or form of a product through processing or manufacturing to enhance or increase the product's value, including making the product suitable to generate renewable energy. [PL 2021, c. 483, Pt. KK, §2 (NEW).]

[PL 2021, c. 483, Pt. KK, §2 (NEW).]

2. Goals; investment; inclusiveness. The commissioner, in coordination with the Department of Economic and Community Development, industry stakeholders, representatives of Indian tribes, communities of color and other underserved communities and populations and other relevant agencies, shall:

A. Strengthen the State's agricultural, food and forest products economy with a priority of making resulting efforts more inclusive of and increasing investments in historically marginalized, underrepresented and underserved communities, including communities of color, low-income communities and rural communities that typically lack access to capital to start, sustain, scale and innovate businesses; [PL 2021, c. 483, Pt. KK, §2 (NEW).]

B. Expand infrastructure investments in the agricultural, food and forest products economy to increase access to new markets and opportunities for producers, processors, small businesses and consumers in the State in the producing, processing, manufacturing, packaging, distribution, marketing, sale and consumption of products; and [PL 2021, c. 483, Pt. KK, §2 (NEW).]

C. Collaborate with other state agencies, economic development organizations and other key institutional partners to establish technical assistance programs to support the objectives of this chapter. [PL 2021, c. 483, Pt. KK, §2 (NEW).]

[PL 2021, c. 483, Pt. KK, §2 (NEW).]

3. Powers. In carrying out the purposes of this chapter, the commissioner may:

A. Hire or assign staff or contractors, including community development financial institutions, economic development organizations, quasi-governmental entities or other capital or technical assistance providers; [PL 2021, c. 483, Pt. KK, §2 (NEW).]

B. Seek and accept funds from public and private sources; and [PL 2021, c. 483, Pt. KK, §2 (NEW).]

C. Administer funds, grants and programs. [PL 2021, c. 483, Pt. KK, §2 (NEW).]
[PL 2021, c. 483, Pt. KK, §2 (NEW).]

SECTION HISTORY

PL 2021, c. 483, Pt. KK, §2 (NEW).

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§320-B. Maine Agriculture, Food and Forest Products Investment Fund

1. Fund established. The Maine Agriculture, Food and Forest Products Investment Fund, referred to in this chapter as "the fund," is established and administered by the department to support public-private partnerships to carry out the purposes of this chapter. The fund consists of money appropriated to the fund or received from any other private or public source. Interest in investment of money of the fund is credited to the fund. Unexpended balances at the end of the fiscal year do not lapse but carry over into the next fiscal year. The Maine Agriculture, Food System and Forest Products Infrastructure Investment Advisory Board established in section 320-C shall oversee and determine expenditures from the fund.

[PL 2021, c. 483, Pt. KK, §2 (NEW).]

SECTION HISTORY

PL 2021, c. 483, Pt. KK, §2 (NEW).

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§320-C. Maine Agriculture, Food System and Forest Products Infrastructure Investment Advisory Board

1. The Maine Agriculture, Food System and Forest Products Infrastructure Investment Advisory Board. The Maine Agriculture, Food System and Forest Products Infrastructure Investment Advisory Board established in Title 5, section 12004-J, subsection 1-A, referred to in this section as "the board," is created to oversee and determine expenditures from the Maine Agriculture, Food and Forest Products Investment Fund in section 320-B.

[PL 2021, c. 483, Pt. KK, §2 (NEW).]

2. Membership. The board consists of the commissioner or the commissioner's designee, the Commissioner of Economic and Community Development or the commissioner's designee and 15 members appointed jointly by the commissioner and the Commissioner of Economic and Community Development as follows:

A. One member of a statewide industry group representing conventional nondairy farming; [PL 2021, c. 483, Pt. KK, §2 (NEW).]

B. One member of a statewide industry group representing organic nondairy farming; [PL 2021, c. 483, Pt. KK, §2 (NEW).]

C. One member of a statewide industry group representing dairy producers; [PL 2021, c. 483, Pt. KK, §2 (NEW).]

D. One member of a statewide industry group representing the forest products industry; [PL 2021, c. 483, Pt. KK, §2 (NEW).]

E. Two members from relevant financial institutions with experience in the agricultural and forest products industries; [PL 2021, c. 483, Pt. KK, §2 (NEW).]

F. One manufacturer of forest products; [PL 2021, c. 483, Pt. KK, §2 (NEW).]

G. One manufacturer of value-added agricultural products or representative of the value-added agricultural products industry; [PL 2021, c. 483, Pt. KK, §2 (NEW).]

H. Two members representing the supply chain in processing, manufacturing or distribution; [PL 2021, c. 483, Pt. KK, §2 (NEW).]

I. One member actively engaged in providing marketing assistance, market development or business and financial planning; [PL 2021, c. 483, Pt. KK, §2 (NEW).]

J. One member from a statewide group representing the logging and trucking industry; [PL 2021, c. 483, Pt. KK, §2 (NEW).]

K. One member who is a member of a federally recognized Indian nation, tribe or band in this State; and [PL 2021, c. 483, Pt. KK, §2 (NEW).]

L. Two members who represent historically underserved racial populations in nondairy farming. [PL 2021, c. 483, Pt. KK, §2 (NEW).]

Board membership must reflect a diversity of skills and experience relevant to investment in agricultural, food and forest products processing and manufacturing industries and represent the racial diversity of the food system in the State with specific representation by Indian tribes, communities of color and other underserved communities and populations.

[PL 2021, c. 483, Pt. KK, §2 (NEW).]

3. Terms; officers; committees; rules. Board members serve for 3-year terms and may serve no more than 2 consecutive terms. The members shall elect a chair and may elect officers, establish one or more committees or subcommittees and adopt such procedural rules as the members determine necessary and appropriate to perform the board's work.

[PL 2021, c. 483, Pt. KK, §2 (NEW).]

4. Quorum; meeting; voting. A majority of the sitting members constitute a quorum, and action taken by the board may be authorized by a majority of the members present and voting at any regular or special meeting at which a quorum is present. The board may permit any or all members to participate in a regular or special meeting by or conduct the meeting through the use of any means of communication, including electronic telecommunications or a telephone conference call, by which all members participating may communicate with each other during the meeting. A member participating in a meeting by means approved by the board under this subsection is deemed to be present in person at the meeting.

[PL 2021, c. 483, Pt. KK, §2 (NEW).]

5. Reimbursement. A member of the board is entitled to reimbursement of mileage and other incidental expenses, if funds are available for such purposes, pursuant to Title 5, chapter 379.

[PL 2021, c. 483, Pt. KK, §2 (NEW).]

6. Powers and duties of board. The board, in determining disbursements of the Maine Agriculture, Food and Forest Products Investment Fund, shall:

A. Facilitate strategic investments in the State's agricultural, food and forest products processing and manufacturing industries, including value-added products; [PL 2021, c. 483, Pt. KK, §2 (NEW).]

B. Foster an environment that encourages innovation, sustainable growth, equity and inclusion; [PL 2021, c. 483, Pt. KK, §2 (NEW).]

C. Implement and maintain business technical assistance programs in support of the fund and other funds as needed; [PL 2021, c. 483, Pt. KK, §2 (NEW).]

D. Determine and devise a process for requests for proposals to perform 3rd-party services in support of and for the management and administration of the fund and other potential natural resource-related funds as needed and for technical assistance programs that ensure that economic development organizations, capital providers and community development financial institutions in any region of the State are able to fairly compete for disbursements from the fund to meet identified infrastructure investment needs and fulfill the objectives of the funding and technical assistance programs; [PL 2021, c. 483, Pt. KK, §2 (NEW).]

E. Enter into performance contracts with one or more persons in order to provide investment and services to agricultural, food and forest products industries, including:

- (1) Technical assistance and product research services;
- (2) Marketing assistance, market development and business and financial planning;
- (3) Organizational, regulatory and development assistance, including feasibility studies of facilities or capital investments to optimize construction and other cost efficiencies; and
- (4) Identification of workforce needs and programs in order to develop training and incentive opportunities for the agricultural, food and forest products industries after consulting with the Department of Labor; and [PL 2021, c. 483, Pt. KK, §2 (NEW).]

F. Oversee, analyze and evaluate programs, contractors and other recipients of funds disbursed by the board annually, including:

- (1) Analyzing fund and technical assistance program use;
- (2) Recommending program changes and improvements;
- (3) Preparing a comprehensive report, in collaboration with the Department of Economic and Community Development and other appropriate agencies and organizational partners, on the

performance, use and sustainability of funds and supporting programs of the Maine Agriculture, Food and Forest Products Investment Fund to submit to the commissioner; and

(4) Collaborating with the Department of Economic and Community Development and other appropriate agencies and organizational partners to ensure that investment objectives are appropriately targeted and not duplicative and to establish various grant and loan instruments as part of the fund. [PL 2023, c. 470, §§1-3 (AMD).]

[PL 2023, c. 470, §§1-3 (AMD).]

SECTION HISTORY

PL 2021, c. 483, Pt. KK, §2 (NEW). PL 2023, c. 470, §§1-3 (AMD).

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Maine Agriculture, Food and Forest Products Infrastructure Fund Advisory Board Meeting Schedule and Draft Meeting Content

Date	Time	Location	Draft Meeting Content
March 5, 2025	1:00 - 2:30 PM	Remote Only - Zoom	PFAS Fund Presentation
March 26, 2025	1:00 - 2:30 PM	Remote Only - Zoom	AIIP and RFSI Presentation Funding Landscape Presentation
April 30, 2025	1:00 - 2:30 PM	Remote Only - Zoom	Benchmark Report Presentation Guest speaker from Vermont
May 28, 2025	1:00 - 2:30 PM	Remote Only - Zoom	Working Groups
June 25, 2025	1:00 – 3:00 PM	In-Person, Augusta with optional AM tour	InCommon Focus Group
July 30, 2025	1:00 - 2:30 PM	Remote Only - Zoom	Working Groups
August 27, 2025	1:00 - 2:30 PM	In-Person or Zoom??	Working Group Presentations Ranking exercise and summation
September 24, 2025	1:00 – 3:00 PM	In-Person, Bangor with optional AM tour	Approve final plan for instruments and priorities
October	No Meeting		
November 19, 2025	1:00 - 2:30 PM	Remote Only - Zoom	Presentation of draft rules Public Hearing

Maine Agriculture, Food and Forest Products Investment Fund Assessment of Existing Capital & Technical Assistance Resources

February 21, 2025

>>DRAFT<<

CEI, in collaboration with DACF and DECD, has hired the consultant team of InCommon Group and Leverage Point Consulting to undertake a research and engagement process to develop actionable recommendations to support the MAFFPIF Advisory Board. The recommendations are intended to assist the advisory board in developing a Fund that will increase access to capital and technical assistance for Maine's agriculture, food, and forestry product businesses.

The first phase of the research included an assessment of existing capital and technical assistance resources. For this process, existing reports were reviewed and a [master spreadsheet](#) was developed and analyzed. Additional research components to be delivered at later dates include a benchmarking study of three other state funds; interviews, surveys, and a gap analysis; and the development of a recommended evaluation framework for the Fund.

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Summary of Existing Resources

A wide variety of funding and technical assistance exists across the capital continuum to support Maine’s agriculture, food, and forest products sectors. These summaries are developed from an Existing Resources spreadsheet, with data primarily obtained for web-based sources.

Funding

105 total funding entities:

- 16 federal funding entities
 - USDA: AMS, FSA, Forest Service, NE Dairy Innovation Center, NRCS, NE Regional Food Business Center, NIFA, RMA, OPPE, Rural Business Cooperative service, Rural Development
 - Other: EDA, EPA, NOAA, Northern Forest Business Center, SBA
- 4 state funding entities
 - DACF, DECD, FAME, Maine Revenue Service
- 82 private and regional funding entities (39 private and regional funding entities, 41 community/commercial banks and credit unions)
 - Nonprofits: Focus Maine, Maine Center for Entrepreneurs, Maine Farmland Trust, Maine Institute of Technology, MOFGA, Maine Venture Fund, and Maine Technology Institute
 - Philanthropy: Elmina B. Sewall Foundation, Henry P. Kendall Foundation, John Merck Fund, Onion Foundation, Quimby Family Foundation, Sandy River Charitable Trust, Seed Money
 - Regional Planning Commissions / COGs / Regional Economic Development Agencies: Androscoggin Valley Council of Governments, Kennebec Valley Council of Governments, Midcoast Council of Governments, Northern Maine Development Commission, Southern Maine Planning and Development Commission, Sunrise County Economic Council (SEEC)
 - CDFIs: Akiptan, CEI, Community Concepts Finance Corp., Four Directions Development Corp., Genesis Fund, MaineStream Finance, Southern Maine

Finance Agency, Flexible Capital Fund, Cooperative Fund of the NE, Eastern Maine Development Corporation, Northern Maine Development Commission, Acadia Federal Credit Union, Community Credit Union, Katahdin Federal Credit Union, University Credit Union

- Private Equity: Black Farmer Fund, CEI Ventures, Cooperative Fund of the NE, Dirigo Angel Fund, Fair Food Fund NE, Maine Angels, Potlikker Capital, Quantified Ventures, Steward
- Government Sponsored Entity: Farm Credit East
- Banks: While individual banks were not analyzed for credit programs, a full list can be found here: https://www.maine.gov/pfr/financialinstitutions/about/who_we-regulate/comprehensive-list-of-financial-institutions

145 funding programs:

- 58 federal funding programs
- 26 state funding programs
- 61 private & regional funding programs

Funding programs by target sector eligibility:

	Agriculture Business	Food Business	Fisheries Business	Forest Products Business	Forestry Operation	Nonprofit
State	15	14	2	11	15	1
Federal	34	14	5	7	5	22
Private / Regional	26	33	21	21	9	12
TOTAL	75	61	28	39	29	35

Funding programs by type:

- 55 loan programs
- 13 equity programs
- 68 grant programs
- 11 tax credit programs
- 2 targeted impact investment programs
- 2 cost-share programs (for forestry)

Stage of Business Development

- Pre-Venture Stage
- Start-up

- Growth Stage
- Maturity
- Sale, Succession, Revitalization or Reorganization

Technical Assistance

There are 25 total TA provider entities, and 33 total TA programs offered.

TA services by organizational type

- 2 CDFIs
- 2 federal government agencies
- 2 government sponsored entities
- 1 institution of higher education
- 20 nonprofit organizations
- 1 private business
- 4 state/regional governments

TA service by sector

- 20 serve agriculture business / farms
- 20 serve food businesses
- 14 serve fisheries businesses
- 13 serve forest products businesses
- 12 serve forestry businesses
- 1 serves NGOs

TA services by type of service

- 17 offer business and financial planning services
- 14 offer access to capital assistance
- 8 offer marketing & sales support
- 7 offer HR / workforce development / organizational development services
- 6 offer conservation / climate resilience / environmental services
- 6 offer land access services
- 5 offer 1:1 Business technical assistance
- 4 offer production / operations technical assistance
- 3 offer land transfer or business succession/sale services

TA services for stage of development

- Pre-Venture Stage
- Start-up
- Growth Stage

- Maturity
- Sale, Succession, or Reorganization

There are TA services across all of the stages of business development, but due to gaps in data, a full analysis cannot be conducted. However, for the data that is available, TA appears to be available for start-up, growth, and maturity stages and less common for pre-venture and sale/succession/reorganizations stages. It is unclear whether the focus on certain stages more than others is due to more/less need, or whether there are truly gaps in TA and capital for businesses at these stages of development.

TA Delivery Method

- 9 provide 1:1 in-depth - Individualized services for one year or more, working continuously with client
- 27 provide 1:1 short-term - individualized services for less than one year. This can include a one-time consultation to a short-term advisory process
- 11 provide training/workshops - These are conducted in a group setting, and can be courses, trainings, or workshops.
- 4 provide cohort/accelerators - These are in-depth learning opportunities conducted in group settings and often include peer-learning and expert advice on specific business goals

Gaps in Data

There are some gaps in existing data unable to be acquired from websites. To gather this information, we would have to send a short survey and hope for a high response rate.

- There is missing / unknown data, particularly for stage of business development and TA delivery method
- We do not know how many businesses & NGOs these funding and TA programs serve.
- We do not know the total amount of funding provided by entity

Key Findings

From the current existing resources, there are a few key findings, however, the interview process will be used to test and dive deeper into this analysis.

- The data implies that overall there are many funding opportunities for Maine's farm, food, fisheries, forest products, and forestry sectors from public and private entities

- Overall, agriculture and food businesses have more funding opportunities than forest products and fisheries
- There are less funding opportunities for pre-venture and start-ups than businesses farther along in their business stage of development
- There are more grants available for production than value-added production, processing, manufacturing, distribution, and retail
- There are many loans available across the value chain, but there may be some types of businesses that have difficulty accessing these loans (needs further research)
- There is more equity available for manufacturing and retail businesses than production / farming
- Overall, there may be certain types of businesses that are unable to access funding, and further research will be needed
- Technical assistance in many forms is available
- Business/financial planning and access to capital are the most common types of TA; less common is land access services, land transfer or business succession planning, and production / operations assistance.
- There is ample short term technical assistance but longer term, in-depth one-on-one TA is less common
- More research is needed on technical assistance gaps and whether wrap-around services would help increase access

Capital and Financing

The major types of capital available to Maine farm, food, and forest products businesses include loans and debt capital, equity, bonds, tax credits, and grants.

Loans & Debt Capital

Money borrowed to support a business is referred to as debt capital, which requires a repayment set by terms. Types of debt capital include loans from banks, community development financial institutions (CDFIs), and small business-focused microlenders. Interest rates to debt capital is typically tax deductible and allows a borrower to retain control of its business as no ownership equity is lost.

Traditional Loans

Traditional loans come in several forms, can be short-term or long-term, and can be used for a variety of purposes such as expansion, equipment purchasing, or commercial real estate. In some cases, they can be used for working capital. Most commonly, these loans are secured with collateral, but this is not always required. Traditional bank loans typically require a

business to demonstrate stability to lower risk of loan default, such as good credit scores, measurable cash flow, and a viable business plan.

These traditional loans can come from private banks, credit unions, and CDFIs, but can also be from the federal government. The Small Business Administration (SBA) is an example. The USDA Farm Service Agency offers a variety of loan programs for farmers, including beginning farmer assistance, as well as grants for conservation practices like the Conservation Stewardship Program.

In Maine, there are many traditional, low-cost loans available, but most of this debt is dependent on collateral to get approved, which can be challenging for early -stage businesses. Farm Credit East is a major source of loans for agricultural producers, as well as the Farm Service Agency (FSA).

Sub Debt

Subordinated debt, or sub debt, is a type of debt that is secondary to other debts, or "subordinate" to them. Subordinated debt can be used for blended finance, which is the use of catalytic capital from public or philanthropic sources to reduce risk to an acceptable level for private investors. It is a higher risk for a lender because the senior lenders are paid first, and if not all the loan is repaid, the sub debt provider may lose money.

A grant, loan guarantee, or credit enhancement can be used for sub debt (see sections of these below). CDFIs, Revolving Loan Funds, and community based lenders can provide sub debt.

Community Development Financial Institutions (CDFIs), also called community lenders, can provide subordinated debt to communities and small businesses, although they also offer direct loans, equity, and other types of capital. CDFIs can be a great option for young businesses because they specialize in underserved communities like women, people of color and entrepreneurs in low-income and rural areas. Despite typically having interest rates that are higher than banks, many community lenders are equipped to help new business owners with the technical aspects of running their business and providing advice.

A revolving loan fund is a gap financing measure primarily used for development and expansion of small businesses. It is a self-replenishing pool of money, utilizing interest and principal payments on old loans to issue new ones. Revolving loan funds can also offer more than sub debt (direct loans, equity).

Maine has a large number of CDFIs and revolving loan funds. There are ten CDFIs in Maine including CEI, regional development agencies including Eastern Maine Development Corporation, Northern Maine Development Commission, and Four Directions Development Corporation, and credit unions including Acadia Federal Credit Union, Community Credit Union, and Katahdin Federal Credit Union. Revolving loan funds are offered by Kennebec Valley Council of Governments, FAME, as well as municipalities such as Farmington.

Near Equity & Royalty Financing

There are certain debt financial products that act similarly to equity in some respects. Near equity capital, sometimes referred to as mezzanine financing, includes a range of financing instruments such as royalty financing, and can also include subordinated debt. According to the Flexible Capital Fund, near equity is not start-up capital but a tool for existing businesses that need to augment traditional sources of financing in order to produce new sales, enter new markets, or create new products.

Royalty financing, also called revenue-based financing, is a risk-tolerant financing source that is not collateral dependent and does not dilute ownership. Royalty financing can be an important component of near equity capital or mezzanine financing that does not dilute company ownership, as other traditional forms of equity do.

According to The Flexible Capital Fund, royalty financing provides an equity solution to companies by selling a piece of the revenue stream instead of selling ownership. Payments can be structured over a fixed period or up until the investor receives a predetermined rate of return. Royalty financing provides the flexibility needed for infrastructure businesses because it matches the company's actual growth - the company is not locked into a fixed payment and interest schedule as they would be in fixed income financing. Royalty based financing also gives investors a "natural" way to exit the deal.

Convertible Debt

A convertible debt tool provides "lenders the choice to either collect their principal and accrued interest at the end of a fixed amount of time (called "terming out") or to "convert" their investment into shares of the company instead" (Flex Capital Fund). It starts off as a loan, but the lender and the company have options to convert the debt to equity under certain predetermined terms as specified in the deal's term sheet. It also allows lenders to become involved with the management of the company should its finances be poor at the time of the conversion opportunity, or—if the business is sold or encounters significant growth—allows them to capitalize on an equity opportunity.

Its usage with food businesses can be "near-equity" in function, e.g. getting capital and liquidity to enterprises without the burden of a fixed, ongoing payment schedule. The covenants are crucial design features of the term sheet and enterprises must plan so they can make good on any such milestones. Companies typically take on convertible debt when they believe their shares will increase in value. This allows them to reduce equity dilution (giving up too much ownership).

Examples of convertible debt available for Maine farm, food, and forest products businesses include CEI and the Vermont-based Flexible Capital Fund.

Microloans

Microloans are smaller, more non-traditional forms of loans, typically under \$50,000. Microlenders are often public or nonprofit entities, but can also be for-profit entities. Both SBA and FSA have microlending programs. Other microlenders available to Maine businesses include regional development corporations like the Northern Maine Development Commission, Southern Maine Finance Agency, and Sunrise County Economic Council, as well as CDFIs like CEI and Community Concepts Finance Corporation.

In addition, there are online microlenders like Kiva, a nonprofit microlender with a crowdfunding element, where business owners can apply for loans and, once it is approved and disbursed, community members fund the loan in small increments.

Peer-to-peer lending

Typically part of fintech (innovative "financial technology" tools), P2P lending websites connect individual borrowers directly to individual lenders. Each platform sets its own rates and terms. Most sites have a wide range of interest rates based on the creditworthiness of the applicant. The risk for lenders is higher as the default rate is more than traditional banks, but for businesses, these loans can be useful if other capital is not available.

Some of these platforms are a good choice for companies, including start-ups. For example, three food-related Maine businesses have utilized the online lending platform Honeycomb Credit, which yielded over \$265,000 to help the businesses grow. These platforms also offer the opportunity for community members to directly invest in a business with a return on investment from interest rates.

Loan Guarantees & Credit Enhancement

Examples of credit enhancements include loan guarantees, capital access programs, collateral support programs, and loan participation programs. These instruments can support investments with high social and environmental impact that are often perceived as high financial risk either due to the size of the expected financial return or track record in the industry.

Loan Guarantee Programs support private loans that may have otherwise been inaccessible or prohibitively expensive by agreeing to reduce the lender's exposure on a loan. It is a legally binding agreement where a third party guarantor promises to pay a loan if the borrower defaults. The guarantor can be a wide range of entities, including a government, financial organizations, or even a family member. Loan guarantees are important because they can help borrowers who don't have enough collateral or a good credit rating, and they can help secure more favorable loan terms and interest rates.

Capital Access Programs provide portfolio insurance in the form of a loan loss reserve fund into which the lender and borrower contribute. They can help to protect lenders from losses on their loans, and can also help small businesses get credit.

Collateral Support Programs provide cash collateral to improve small businesses' ability to borrow funds to grow a business. Loan Participation Programs provide credit support through the purchase of a portion of a loan made by a lender or through a direct loan alongside a private lender.

Examples of loan guarantee programs include USDA FSA and Rural Development and MOFGA. Maine is also part of the US Treasury's State Small Business Credit Initiative (SSCCI). It includes a menu of several credit enhancements from which states select for their particular program. Grow Maine, administered by FAME in conjunction with various statewide lending partners, provides up to \$62 million of SSBCI funding to eligible Maine businesses. Funding is available through FAME and its intermediary partners via loan guarantees, direct loans, and equity capital.

Bond Financing

Bonds are a capital source for small to midsize food infrastructure businesses. Industrial development bonds (IDBs) can be used for food industry related manufacturers and other businesses. IDBs are authorized in every state and provide low-cost tax-exempt financing for small to mid-sized manufacturers and regional infrastructure projects. There are both tax-exempt bonds and revenue bonds, and they tend to be fairly inflexible, so businesses need to ensure they have a strong business model and revenue generation to pay back the debt. Bonds are not well utilized, and many finance agencies do not offer them.

There are 20 states around the country, not including Maine, that offer First Time Farmer Aggie Bond programs which provide tax-exempt financing to support investments in new and beginning farmers. Aggie Bond programs are established through a federal-state partnership that allows private lenders to receive federal and/or state tax-exempt interest on loans made to

beginning farmers, which is a cost-effective way to support farmers by offering loans with lower interest rates.

It's unclear whether there are bonds available to Maine's businesses, but the Maine Technology Asset Fund 2.0 (MTAF 2.0) provided \$45 million to be distributed in a competitive process to Maine-based public and private companies to support infrastructure, equipment, and technology upgrades in MTI's seven targeted sectors.

Equity

Private equity is a broad category that refers to capital investment made into private companies, or those not listed on a public exchange, such as the New York Stock Exchange. A key aspect of equity is that the investor takes ownership shares of the businesses.

An important part of private equity is the relationship between the investing firm and the company receiving capital. Private equity companies often provide more than capital to the firms they invest in; they also provide technical assistance and industry expertise.

There are several stages of business development private equity can invest in, including venture capital, which invests in startup and early-stage ventures, and growth capital, which helps mature companies expand or restructure.

Equity investments include angel, venture, and program-related investments. They are typically high risk and high tolerance, with an ownership position that may require an exit strategy or sale.

Venture Capital

Venture capitalists (VCs) are professionals who invest other people's money. Venture capital organizations can be for-profit or nonprofit. They are typically interested in the investment that comes from the growth potential of a company, and is often targeted at start-up businesses. Venture capital requires a business to provide ownership equity to the investor.

Angel

Angel investors are wealthy individuals who invest their own money in businesses, typically start-ups. They are typically accredited investors by definition (defined by the SEC as an individual with a net worth of \$1 million or more (excluding their primary residence), or who has an annual income of \$200,000 / \$300,000 jointly with a spouse), although theoretically they could be below that threshold. Many Slow Money investors fall into this category. Slow Money

chapters help link angel and other investors to social impact funding opportunities (note: Slow Money Maine dissolved in 2021).

Compared to venture capitalists, angel investors may also be more patient with entrepreneurs and open to providing smaller dollar amounts for a longer time period. Like venture capital, they often do want to see an exit strategy at some point through a public offering or an acquisition.

Program-related or Impact Investments

Program-related, targeted, and mission-based impact investments typically have philanthropic foundations as a source. They are ways foundations can move beyond grants into the category of impact investing -- often associated with a triple bottom line, i.e., not solely for financial considerations. Program-related come from the program fund pool and aim for programmatic impacts. Mission-based investments are administered by fiduciaries managing the corpus funds, and have to date been less commonly deployed than program-related investments.

These program-related investments can be below-market terms and meet IRS charitable purpose requirements, adjusted-risk investments that are mission-based but with market-rate return expectations and elevated risk, and mission-related investments that have market-rate return expectations. The key differentiator between these types is tax and compliance purposes.

In Maine, program-related and targeted impact investments are offered by the Elmina B. Sewall Foundation. They particularly focused on equity as an impact outcome, and have invested in the agriculture and food sector, including Maine Grains.

Evergreen Funds

Evergreen funds and more permanent types of capital structures can support agricultural and other types of businesses. They do not have steep growth trajectories, which allows traditional equity investors to earn their expected return when exiting. This helps avoid the pitfalls of short-term investment horizons, which can conflict with a company's mission, prioritizing profits over social and environmental impact. Evergreen funds can have long time horizons of 100 years or more, providing long-term, patient capital. This provides options for companies to sustainably grow over time without the restrictions of many equity fund structures that have short term growth expectations and exit requirements.

Tax Credits & Targeted Tools

New Markets Tax Credits (NMTC) programs have funded a wide variety of food, farm, and forest business development. NMTC programs incentivize community development and economic growth through the use of tax credits that attract private investment to distressed communities. Businesses that receive the tax credits work with a community development entity that is certified to administer NMTC.

Tax increment finance (TIF) districts have been established throughout the country to help finance food access related projects such as grocery stores in healthy food priority areas and food-related economic development projects like food hubs.

In addition, nearly every state has one or more special assessment tools in place to facilitate development. Special assessments are fees to taxpayers that are used for public improvement projects, and can include special tax districts. Several communities around the country have used this tool to drive targeted food manufacturing district development, or even preserve valuable farm land.

Maine has a variety of tax credits and targeted tools. FAME has two tax credit programs. The Maine New Markets Capital Investment Program is a New Markets Tax Credits program that attracts investment capital to low-income communities by providing a state tax credit on equity investments they make in Community Development Entities (CDEs). The Maine Seed Capital Tax Credit Program is designed to attract equity investments in ME businesses. State income tax credits can be authorized to investors by FAME for up to 50% of the cash equity provided to eligible Maine businesses, both directly and through venture capital funds.

The Maine Revenue Service also has two tax credit programs. The Biofuel Commercial Production Tax Credit, which provides a tax credit of 4 cents per gallon for the certified production of biofuels, and the Renewable Chemicals Tax Credit, which provides a tax credit of 8 cents per pound of renewable chemical production.

DECD has a variety of tax credit programs. The Pine Tree Development Zones (PTDZ) Program offers eligible businesses the chance to greatly reduce (up to 80%) or virtually eliminate state taxes for up to ten years when they create new, quality jobs in certain business sectors, or move existing jobs in those sectors to Maine. Eligible sectors include aquaculture and marine technology, composite materials technology, and advanced technologies for forestry and agriculture. The Opportunity Zones incentive is a community investment tool established by the federal government to encourage long-term investments in low-income urban and rural communities nationwide, providing a tax incentive for investors to re-invest their unrealized capital gains into dedicated Opportunity Funds. There is also Employment Tax Increment Financing, which helps new and established businesses hire new employees by refunding 30-

75% of the state withholding taxes paid by the qualified employees for up to 10 years. In addition, the Major Food Processing Manufacturing Expansion Program encourages the location and expansion of food processing and manufacturing facilities in Maine.

CEI Capital Management is a wholly-owned subsidiary of CEI that provides access to flexible capital through the Federal New Markets Tax Credits Program, and the Maine New Markets Capital Investment Program.

Grants

Maine has a wide array of grant programs for farm, food, and forest products businesses, as well as nonprofit organizations working in these sectors. Grants are potentially risky to funders, but repayment is not required, making it an important source of funding. However, grants can have some drawbacks, such as the lengthy and complex application and reporting process.

Federal Grants

There are a wide variety of federal grants available for farm, food, fisheries, forest products, and forestry businesses and nonprofits. Some of these are cost share rather than direct grants, but like grants, do not require repayment.

USDA FSA	Organic Certification Cost Share Program , Biomass Crop Assistance Program
USDA Northeast Dairy Innovation Center	Dairy Farm Improvement & Modernization Grant
USDA NRCS	Agricultural Conservation Easement Program (ACEP) , Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) , Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) , Conservation Reserve Program – Transition Incentives Program (CRP-TIP) , EQIP Organic Initiative , Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP) , Conservation Innovation Grants (CIG) , Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP)
Northeast Regional Food Business Center (led by NASDA)	Business Builder Grant Program
USDA Northeast Dairy Innovation Center	Dairy Co-Packing Grant , Dairy Processor Modernization Grant , Dairy Marketing and Branding Services Grant Program
SBA	Small Business Innovation Research (SBIR) and Small Business Technology Transfer (STTR) programs
USDA (in partnership with DACF)	Resilient Food Systems Infrastructure

USDA AMS and DACF	Specialty Crop Block Grants Program (SCBGP)
USDA AMS	Local Food Purchase Assistance Cooperative Agreement Program (LFPA), Farmers Market and Local Food Promotion Program
USDA National Institute of Food and Agriculture (NIFA)	Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education (SARE) , Food Safety Outreach Program , Community Food Projects , Beginning Farmer and Rancher Development Program (BFRDP)
USDA Rural Development	Rural Cooperative Development Grant Program , Value-Added Producer Grants
Northern Forest Center	Future Forest Economy Initiative
USDA Forest Service	Forest Legacy Program , Wood Innovations
EDA	Economic Adjustment Assistance and Build Back Better Regional Challenge
Northern Border Regional Commission	State Economic & Infrastructure Development Investment Program (SEID) and Regional Forest Economy Partnership
EPA/ME DEP	EPA Nonpoint Source Water Pollution Control ("319") Grants
USDA Business-Cooperative Service	Rural Energy for America Program
USDA's Office of Partnerships and Public Engagement (OPPE)	Outreach and Assistance for Socially Disadvantaged and Veteran Farmers and Ranchers
USDA Rural Development and Reinvestment Fund - a CDFI	Healthy Food Financing Initiative

State Grants

There are a few state-funded grants and cost share programs in Maine.

Maine Forest Service	WoodsWise , Invasive Plant Management Program
DACF	Agricultural Development Grant (ADG) , Farms for the Future Phases 1 & 2
DECD	Maine Economic Recovery Grants , Community Development Block Grant Program
MTI	Maine Technology Asset Fund , Cross Laminated Timber Challenge
MTI/DECD/DACF	Forest Products Industry Grants

DACF/FAME	Technical Loan (separate option within AMLF)
Maine Rural Development Authority	Rural Manufacturing and Industrial Site Redevelopment Program

Private Grants

Private grants are offered by the following organizations:

- Maine Farmland Trust
- Southern Maine Planning and Development Commission
- Farm Credit East
- John Merck Fund
- Onion Foundation
- Quimby Family Foundation
- Sandy River Charitable Foundation
- SeedMoney
- Maine Institute of Technology
- Kennebec Valley Council of Governments
- Maine Technology Institute's Core Funding Program
- Quantified Ventures
- Elmina B. Sewall Foundation
- Henry P. Kendall Foundation
- Fair Food Fund - Northeast
- CEI
- Maine Development Foundation

Appendix A: Existing Resources Category Descriptions

Organization Type (TA Tab)

- Government Sponsored Enterprise - A financial services entity created by government to serve public purposes, such as increasing credit for sectors of the economy
- NGO - a nonprofit organization
- CDFI/Lender - includes CDFIs, credit unions, and banks
- Academic Institution - an institution of higher education
- Federal Government
- State/Regional (sub-state) Government
- Private Consultant

Organization Type (Private Funding Tab - no column for State and Federal Government spreadsheets)

- Government Sponsored Enterprise - A financial services entity created by government to serve public purposes, such as increasing credit for sectors of the economy
- Investor - This typically focused on equity investments, but can include other types of investment including convertible debt and other forms of near -equity
- CDFI - Community Development Finance Institute
- Credit Union Lender that is a nonprofit money cooperative that functions much like a bank
- Bank - traditional lender
- NGO - nonprofit organization
- Philanthropy - Typically provides grants but some do targeted investments

Target Sector

- Agriculture - a farm or ranch growing, raising, or producing value-added food
- Food - a food business such as a processor, manufacturer, distributor, or retail establishment of food products
- Fisheries/Aquaculture - a fisheries or aquaculture operation
- Forestry - A forestry or logging operation
- Forest Products - A forest products operation (processing, manufacturing, etc.)
- NGO/Gov't Entity - a non-profit organization or a local, county, or state government

Funding Type (Funding spreadsheets only)

- Loan - includes a variety of traditional and non-traditional loans

- Grant - funds that are not expected to be repaid in money or equity
- Equity - provides investment funding with expectations that a portion of the business's ownership equity will be provided to the investor
- Tax Credit - includes a variety of tax credits
- TA - this is specifically for technical assistance to access capital and funding

Stage of Development

Pre-Venture Stage - Planning and research are the primary activities involved in the pre-venture or seed stage of business development. At this stage of the business the focus is on matching the business opportunity with skills, experience, and passions. Other focal points include deciding on a business ownership structure, finding professional advisors, and business planning. Early in the business life cycle, with no proven market or customers, the business will rely on cash from owners, friends, and may be able to access other forms of capital.

family. Other potential sources include suppliers, customers, and government grants.

Start-up - Achieving break-even sales targets, building a customer base, and establishing your brand and track record are at the core of the early stage of the business life cycle. To do so, however, also requires close attention to operational financing, cash flow management, accounting and record keeping, as well as updates to the business and marketing plans. Legal services, human resources, and risk management are also key areas requiring attention. In this stage the push is to get essentials in place so that the business is viable and can sustain itself.

Growth Stage - Growth stage businesses seek to take off from their base level of sales and operations, becoming profitable and, in time, achieving a higher base. Expanding your business requires more than increased sales and employment. Growth often requires assessing and adjusting the organizational structure, delegating management control, and developing longer-term strategies for human resources, access to capital, and expansion through a strategic planning process. Some firms grow in spurts as a result of focused programs and others expand continuously.

Maturity - Mature companies have achieved a solid business that, because of either market conditions or the preferences of owners, appear sustainable but which, without dramatic change, are unlikely to expand significantly. Even though they have achieved strong recognition, branding, goodwill, and a solid repeat customer base, mature businesses often face many challenges. Sustaining business in a rapidly changing and competitive market place or in the face of declining sales can be a major challenge. A focus on problem solving, leadership, and quality improvement can often be necessary for a mature business to maintain its position in the marketplace. Often, planning for the succession of leadership, or an exit strategy for the business is the most appropriate strategy.

Sale, Succession, or Reorganization - Business that are in a process of selling or developing succession plans. This can also include planning efforts to significantly reorganize structure.

Type of Services

- Business/Financial/Operational Planning - includes business planning, financial planning, and operational planning such as creating business plans, financial benchmarking, and business efficiencies to maximize profit and viability
- Marketing/Sales - includes market research, marketing campaigns, and support to increase sales
- Land Access/Real Estate - includes support in accessing and purchasing property
- Succession/Transfer - includes planning for a business and/or real estate succession, transfer, or sale as well as estate planning
- Accounting/Taxes - includes bookkeeping, payroll, accounting, and tax services
- Legal/Regulatory - includes services to help business with compliance, permitting, navigating regulations, legal advice, or intellectual property protections
- Conservation/Environment - includes conservation, environmental, and climate resilience services
- Access to Capital - includes helping businesses access loans, grants, equity, or any other forms of capital and funding
- Production - includes support on production techniques and operating practices, such as farming practices, logistics, production technology, and manufacturing
- HR/Organization Development - includes support for hiring, recruiting, human resources, workforce training, and organizational development

TA Delivery Method

- 1:1 in-depth - Individualized services for one year or more, working continuously with client
- 1:1 short-term - individualized services for less than one year. This can include a one-time consultation to a short-term advisement process
- Trainings/workshops - These are conducted in a group setting, and can be courses, trainings, or workshops.
- Cohort/accelerators - These are in-depth learning opportunities conducted in group settings and often include peer-learning and expert advice on specific business goals

Meeting Summary for Agriculture, Food and Forest Products Infrastructure Fund Board Meeting (03/05/2025)

Quick recap

The Maine Agriculture, Food and Forest Products Infrastructure Fund Advisory Board held its inaugural meeting, electing co-chairs and establishing working agreements. The board discussed the fund's structure, goals, and processes, drawing insights from the PFAS Fund's implementation and exploring potential meeting formats. They also outlined a timeline for future meetings and decision-making, emphasizing the importance of in-person gatherings and diverse representation on the board.

Next steps

- Jo D. and DACF staff to develop a proposed meeting schedule incorporating in-person and virtual meetings across different locations for the Board to review at the March 26th meeting.
- Craig and Tricia (co-chairs) to meet with DACF staff for a debrief after each full Advisory Board meeting to plan for the next meeting.
- DACF staff to include agenda, working agreements, statute, and updated timeline in each meeting packet going forward.
- Board members to consider potential candidates for the vacant wood products industry position on the Board.
- Erica Campbell and team to prepare for using the June 25th meeting as a focus group session with the Board.
- DACF staff to schedule the next Board meeting for March 26th via Zoom.

Summary

Maine Agriculture Infrastructure Fund Advisory Board

The Advisory Board of the Maine Agriculture, Food and Forest Products Infrastructure Fund holds its first official meeting. Craig Lapine, the director of the Bureau of Agriculture, Food and Rural Resources, introduces the meeting objectives and agenda. The board elects Craig Hickman and Tricia Rouleau as co-chairs. Jo D. Saffair presents draft working agreements for the board, which are accepted without changes. The agreements cover meeting logistics, participation expectations, and decision-making processes.

Statutory Structure and Advisory Board

Craig presented the statutory structure of the fund, emphasizing its collaborative nature and the importance of recognizing its role in the broader ecosystem. He outlined the specific goals of the program, including economic strengthening, infrastructure

investment, and collaboration. Craig also discussed the fund's establishment and the advisory board's role in determining expenditures. He clarified that while grants were a primary tool, other mechanisms like contracting out services were also available. Craig emphasized that the Board would evaluate the fund's performance in meeting objectives and emphasized that the Board's role was not to staff the fund but to provide directional advice.

PFAS Fund: Processes and Outcomes Discussed

Beth presented the process and outcomes from the establishment of the PFAS Fund. The fund, established in 2022, has allocated 60 million dollars to support commercial farms impacted by PFAS contamination. The funds were allocated to four broad categories: financial assistance to producers, land and property acquisition, research, and health initiatives. An advisory committee with four subcommittees was established to determine how to spend the funds, with extensive planning and public hearings. Internal policies and rulemaking processes were also implemented. The fund has been distributing funds since March 2024, and an annual report to the Legislature is planned. Some programs, especially the Health Initiative, are still ramping up and will be refined as the fund develops.

PFAS Advisory Committee Progress and Priorities

Beth discussed the structure and progress of the PFAS Advisory Committee. The committee established four subcommittees, each with a mission and scope, and a strategy template was used to guide the subcommittees' conversations and recommendations. The subcommittees followed the same flow, and the plan was compiled and shared publicly. The committee used the SharePoint system for sharing documents and meeting materials. Beth also noted that the timeline for the project has been revised as the work progressed. Craig, on the other hand, emphasized the importance of deciding on priorities and instruments for the fund to proceed with rulemaking and staff action.

Craig's Role and Team Support Discussion

In the meeting, Craig discussed his role to provide information and resources for the team's tasks. He also introduced Erica Campbell from InCommon Group, a consulting firm, who shared her expertise and willingness to assist. Craig then laid out his near-term objectives and asked for any questions or comments. Later, Craig introduced a condensed slide from the board packet, indicating the sequence of the first nine half-board meetings. Erica also shared her involvement in the project, highlighting their work on existing resources, interviews, and benchmarking other states' funds. The conversation ended with an open invitation for further questions or comments.

Advisory Board Meetings and Structure

The group discussed the proposed timeline and structure for upcoming meetings. Craig outlined a plan for monthly meetings, with the next few focusing on existing resources,

other program examples, and decision-making. He suggested the possibility of forming working groups to bring in additional expertise. A special meeting on June 25th is planned for Erica's team to gather input from the board. Craig emphasized the need to make key decisions about instruments and priorities by the end of September. The board members inquired about the reasoning behind the advisory board approach and the typical timeline for such processes. They also discussed the potential for in-person meetings and the importance of diverse representation on the board.

Discussing Board Meeting Formats

The meeting focused on discussing preferred meeting formats for the board, given the geographic dispersity of its members. The current format involves 90-minute Zoom meetings once a month. Suggestions included having one or two in-person meetings, possibly focusing on feedback from working groups. The idea of hosting in-person meetings in the county was also proposed. The consensus was that in-person meetings are important for better collaboration and understanding among members.

Sarah suggested the need to prioritize scheduling meetings in spaces that can accommodate all participants and provide necessary amenities. Jo D. offered to develop a schedule that accounts for in-person meetings dispersed across the state, and other meetings on Zoom. The group agreed on the importance of in-person meetings for better connections, with some exceptions like Nicolas, who mentioned his unavailability due to his wild blueberry farm. The team decided to take all suggestions back and present a proposal at the next meeting. Craig emphasized the importance of the March 26th meeting and the need for participants to start scheduling in-person meetings if the consensus is to do so. The team agreed to continue their work, with Craig promising to keep everyone updated.

AI-generated content edited by DACF staff.