

Testimony in support of LD2019-4  
January 22, 2024  
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Good morning, Senator Ingwersen, Representative Pluecker, and members of the Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry Committee. I'm Kate Pilotte, from Castine. I'm the Founder of Farm & Fish, a local meal kit company that started sales in June 2023. My initial marketing research revealed that many who tried and abandoned the meal kit experience had two reasons: 1) they didn't know where their food was from (or preferred supporting local food producers) and 2) a great distaste for the amount of plastic used in packing and shipping of ingredients.

So, the vision for Farm & Fish was to provide a variety of delicious kits while addressing those two concerns: source locally (and make sure customers knew the sources) and present kits in sustainable, safe packaging.

Initially, the plan to address the latter was to kit ingredients in reusable containers. I identified robust, attractive stainless steel and glass containers that could be sanitized in commercial sanitizing dishwashers, and I found a commercial kitchen equipped with a dishwasher capable of sanitizing packaging between uses.

Soon into the licensing process however, I was surprised to learn that Maine law prohibits any use of vendor-owned reusable packaging, despite progress in reusable packaging made in the 2021 update to the food policy with guidance for customer-owned packaging.

There was no option for appeal, variance, proof-of-concept, or selective use (for example for ingredients to be cooked, like raw rice or pasta). I started asking why the policy doesn't accommodate reuse (especially because restaurants do it every day, I can expand on the response I received if you like), how to pursue opportunities for this to be permitted, and sharing my learnings with those in my community.

I abhor greenwashing and resent the amount of onus that's been put on me as a consumer by companies to deal with their packaging waste responsibly and sustainably – all the while not really understanding what that means. I refuse to let Farm & Fish become part of that problem.

As a result, Farm & Fish currently uses a combination of compostable packaging where possible and plastic packaging where necessary. I'd like to add, in the interest of illustrating how hard it is for a well-meaning consumer to navigate responsible disposal, that I learned that not all "compostable" packaging is compostable for me or those around me. Many plastic-like (i.e. corn-based PLA) compostable materials require a high-heat commercial facility, which isn't available in my area. The commercial composter in my area takes fiber-based, non-coated containers, which also break down in many home compost bins. Additionally, because the plastic-like containers are not plastic, they're not appropriate for recycling bins.

I'm hoping the single-use packaging is a temporary solution until Farm & Fish can offer customers a reusable packaging solution.

Throughout this process, I've learned more about the industrial opportunity for Maine through companies invested in owning, processing, and providing containers for this and many other purposes.

Customers want this, but I can't respond because the law obstructs my ability to do so. Not only do customers want it, but some even assume it's already happening. I briefly worked as a delivery driver for FarmDrop. More than once, I was greeted by a customer who wanted to return a reusable bag or jar they received as part of a previous order. I'd decline, and they'd look confused.

This bill doesn't only help Farm & Fish; if that were true, I wouldn't be wasting your time. It can allow farmers at weekly markets to sell their goods in reusable containers and leverage the weekly routine to

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collect containers, sanitize, and refill for future market sales. Their packaging costs would transition from a constant stream of expense to an investment in materials.

In many cases, the robust and inert nature of reusables can also improve the customer experience. For example, many ingredients in Farm & Fish meal kits aren't appropriate for fiber-based compostable portion cups, like oils or other liquids, because they seep into the seams or worse, leech through the material. In hot humid summers, even the briefest exposure in transition from a cooler to a customer can cause containers to sweat, which can compromise the fiber-based packaging. Materials like glass and stainless-steel match the properties of plastic but are only economically viable if they can be reclaimed, sanitized, and reused. Without that as an option, Farm & Fish finds its only option in these circumstances is to use plastic portion cups (which can be recycled) or bags (which can't).

I close by asking you to support LD2091 - to open the door for companies around Maine to make decisions that are right for their business, safely meet customer demands, relieve burden on local municipalities tasked with waste disposal, and explore new business models. Thank you for your time.