



MAINE AQUACULTURE ASSOCIATION

May 1, 2025

The Honorable Denise Tepler, Senate Chair
The Honorable Allison Hepler, House Chair
Joint Standing Committee on Marine Resources
State House, Room 202
Augusta, ME. 04333

Senator Tepler, Representative Hepler, Honorable members of the Joint Committee on Marine Resources:

My name is Sebastian Belle and I am the Executive Director of the Maine Aquaculture Association (MAA). The MAA is the oldest state aquaculture association in the country. We are a volunteer membership association whose board of directors is selected to represent the diversity of the aquaculture sector in terms of species, production method and company size. Irrespective of company size each company has one vote. We represent Maine's aquatic farmers that raise finfish, shellfish and sea vegetables. Our farmers annually produce over 100 million dollars in farm gate revenue and directly employ roughly 700 Maine citizens year-round. We purchase goods and services from over 400 Maine businesses and our total economic impact is roughly 150 million dollars annually.

I stand before you today to testify in strong support of LD 1279 "An Act to Require the Department of Marine Resources to Conduct Biotoxin Testing of Cultured Scallops".

Aquaculture in Maine has grown slowly but steadily over the last 20 years. In fact aquaculture is the only commercial marine resource use that has grown at all. One of the strengths of the aquaculture sector is its diversity. We currently grow 24 different species using 14 different production methods and our farms range from a small farm with one owner operator to larger farms employing hundreds of Maine citizens. That diversity of species, farming methods and company size helped Maine aquaculture survive the market shock when COVID hit and helps us remain competitive in the face of low priced imports.

Over the last 10 years a small group of determined fishermen and farmers have been pioneering methods to farm our native scallop. They have adapted methods used in other parts of the world and worked incredibly hard to start a series of new farms right here in Maine. As with any new species they have faced a series of challenges and found effective solutions by trial and error. One of the most serious challenges has been the high cost of biotoxin testing to ensure the safety of public health. These costs are extremely high and can occur frequently depending on the time of year and frequency of harvest. To date the costs of testing have been largely covered by grants raised by a number of different partners. As you all know the granting climate has shifted dramatically and our farms are starting to produce more scallops to send to the market more frequently. Eventually we expect that the farms will be generating enough revenue to pay for

testing themselves but right now we find ourselves in a catch 22 situation. Farms are starting to get more productive but they are still too small to be able to pay for the testing themselves. LD1279 helps the farmers bridge the funding gap and continue to grow the sector to a scale where testing costs can be afforded.

Maine scallops have a tremendous reputation in the market. Simply put they are known as the best product out there. Maine scallop farmers are finding ways to produce that product and supplement our states wild harvest. I ask that you give them a helping hand and vote **Ought to Pass as Amended** on LD 1279. I also ask for the committee's help in advocating before the appropriations committee to ensure the bill does not die because of the small fiscal note it has attached. \$50,000 annually for two years is a small investment to help this exciting new sector that if allowed to grow could be generating literally millions of dollars and bolstering the Maine reputation for the highest quality seafood in the country.

Thank you for your attention, I would be glad to answer any questions you may have.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read 'S. Belle', written in a cursive style.

Sebastian M. Belle
Executive Director