

Testimony of Simon West for The Maine State Chamber of Commerce In Support
of
L.D. 901 Resolve, to Establish a Pilot Project to Support Farm Apprenticeships in
Maine

Chairs Ingwersen and Pluecker, and esteemed members of the Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry Committee, my name is Simon West. I reside in Gardiner and I represent the Maine State Chamber of Commerce, a statewide business association made up of both large and small businesses, here to provide you with my testimony in support of a pilot project to support farm apprenticeships.

The Maine State Chamber and its business members support this legislation due to our policy positions around experiential and work-based learning. Our goal is to grow the size and skills of Maine's workforce. With job training that develops real skills that lead to fulfilling careers and upward economic mobility, we are more capable of keeping a talented workforce in Maine. This piece of legislation is especially important because of the consequences of inaction.

For years family and independent farms in Maine have been consolidated our pushed out of the market by corporate farms with capital, machinery, and technology that smaller farms are not designed to have and cannot compete with. A crucial way to fight against the advantages of corporate farms is to have a skilled workforce. Without action this trend of consolidation will continue and have significant negative outcomes.

On the surface there are many food brands which gives consumers the illusion of choice. When you dig deeper there are strikingly few producers and processors that distribute food to our nation's population. In the height of the pandemic a COVID outbreak at a single meat processing plant disrupted grocery store shelves nationwide. We should do our part to shelter Maine people from

such a fragile food supply chain. Currently we are seeing other effects of consolidated food systems. Food prices have soared and inflationary pressures have created grocery bills that families are struggling to meet.

In supporting this resolve I would point toward our partners at Educate Maine and FocusMaine. They have successfully begun innovative programs and apprenticeships in Maine's rapidly growing Aquaculture sector. Their model of success could be replicated and adjusted for agriculture, giving this new venture best practices to build on.

If we work together to help our family and independent farms have the workforce they need to continue producing their product we can help Maine people be better situated in times of uncertainty. I ask that you pass LD901 and begin the process of increasing the skilled workforce base in this critical industry.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide you with our testimony.