



THE MAINE SENATE
131st Legislature

Testimony of Senator Richard A. Bennett
In Support of LD 416, “An Act to Authorize a General Fund Bond Issue for Research and Development and Commercialization”
24 April 2023

Senator Rotundo, Representative Sachs, and distinguished Members of the Joint Standing Committee on Appropriations and Financial Affairs,

Thank you for the opportunity to share some thoughts in support of LD 416, *An Act to Authorize a General Fund Bond Issue for Research and Development and Commercialization*.

In the mid-90’s, when I was first serving in the Maine Senate, we began serious discussions about strategic investments in research and development (R&D). I was honored in 1997 to be appointed co-chair alongside Senator Mary Carthcart by Senate President Mark Lawrence of the Joint Select Committee on Research and Development. Working in partnership with President Mark Lawrence, Senators Carol Kontos and Jill Goldthwait, and Speaker Steve Rowe¹, we pushed forward initiatives which led to the Maine Technology Institute (MTI), the Maine Economic Improvement Fund (MEIF) at UMaine, and substantial bond funding for R&D.

The MTI been recognized nationally for successfully building “R&D collaborations between universities, companies and nonprofit research institutions”² through their competitive, peer reviewed, bid process. By it’s 20th anniversary in 2019, MTI had made over 2800 distinct project awards. These projects can be found in every corner of Maine and all 16 counties. They are just as likely to be awarded in rural Maine as they are in Portland, Lewiston, or Bangor. The diversity of the awardees supports the positive impact on the whole Maine economy.

Funding comes in all shapes and sizes. Many of the grants are small and focus on early-stage companies that manufacture innovative products. For example, in Alna, Port-Lite is building affordable, lightweight, durable campers³ thanks in part to a grant from MTI. Some awardees focus on heritage Maine industries like agriculture. For example, at the Maine Grain Alliance in Skowhegan, they are working to support grain farms throughout Maine helping with innovation, best practices, and identifying needs in Maine’s burgeoning grain economy.

¹ http://www.mainetechnology.org/docs/mti_10_years_of_investing.pdf at 3.

² <https://www.mainetechnology.org/news/maine-technology-institute-wins-national-award-for-expanding-maines-innovation-economy-through-its-bond-funded-maine-technology-asset-fund/>

³ <https://www.port-lite.com/faq/>

While it is certainly true that MTI supports traditional labs that are committed to biotechnology, it is just as common for MTI to support innovation in the other six sectors: Forest Products and Aquaculture, Information Technology, Marine Technology and Aquaculture, Precision Manufacturing, and Composites and Advanced Materials.⁴

If you represent a coastal community perhaps you prefer investments in Marine Technology. If you live in Maine's heartland, you might think investing in Forest Products and Agriculture makes the most sense. The truth is, it is important to take a broad approach and not advance one of the sectors over the other. The rigorous competition will help ensure that the public's money will be wisely spent, will drive matching funds, and will have a positive impact on the economy. And yes, those seven sectors are not set in stone. As we approach the 25th anniversary of MTI, I am sponsoring a study to review if we still have the right mix of industries. We always need to innovate to make sure our institutions are serving our state well.

A final word. Investing in R&D has been Maine's most successful economic development tool in the last 24 years. It has been well documented in academic studies that scientific discoveries, new technologies, and inventive applications of cutting-edge knowledge are essential for success in the competitive global economy. The strength of a Maine's overall support for R&D in both the public and private sectors, will help secure Maine's future economic success.⁵

⁴ <https://www.mainetechnology.org/who-is-mti/technology-sectors/>

⁵ <https://nces.nsf.gov/pubs/nsb20225>