

Testimony of Adam Nordell – Defend Our Health In SUPPORT of LD 2273 An Act to Establish a State Minimum Hourly Wage for Agricultural Workers

Dear Senator Tipping, Representative Roeder, and members of the Joint Standing Committee on Labor and Housing. My name is Adam Nordell and I am submitting testimony in support of LD 2273 on behalf Defend Our Health, where I work as a campaign manager. I urge you to make small changes to the proposed language of this bill and to vote in support of its passage. Doing so will help bring the rights of agricultural workers in Maine more closely in line with other sectors of the economy.

Maine’s farms work in partnership with our seasonal and year-round farmworkers to power our rural communities. The success of our farm businesses and their robust contribution to Maine’s economy are dependent on the relentlessly hard and undervalued work of the people who do the physical work of farming –all of the planting, tending, pruning, weeding, harvesting, washing, packing, feeding, moving, milking and cleaning that it takes to make a farm run and get a meal to our dinner plates. For almost ninety years these critical workers have been preventing access to the basic labor protections that the rest of us take for granted. The right to a fair wage. The right to take an occasional, short break. Protections against excessive weekly hours. Additional compensation for overtime. When things go wrong, the rest of us have the right to address our workplace grievances through collective bargaining or private action. But not farmworkers.

My own experience running a farm business for 12 years taught me that a good farm crew is unquestionably a farm’s most important asset. In the volatile labor market of the past few years, farms sometimes struggle to retain skilled farmworkers and are often forced to train new employees each year to bring them up to speed in the challenging and nuanced work of making a farm run. When farm work is undervalued by the farm owner and by the state of Maine, workers are more likely to look off the farm for a more stable, better paying and less physically demanding job, and farmers will live with the stress of finding and training new workers each year. When farm work is valued, the farm labor market stabilizes and farm owners will reap the many benefits of working with a committed, skilled workforce.

Defend Our Health supports LD 2273’s provisions to bring farmworker minimum wage in-line with other economic sectors, to index the minimum wage to inflation, to require that farmworker hours be reported via a paystub. However, there are several key areas where the bill falls short of the Department of Labor’s recommendations to protect the rights of farmworkers, and these sections should be redrafted. The current language fails to protect workers’ rights to take rest breaks, fails to protect farmworkers from excessive overtime, prevents farmworkers from accessing overtime pay and prevents farmworkers from taking private action if they experience wage theft or other labor violations.

Extending these very basic workplace protections to the agricultural sector will help protect some of our hardest working neighbors and help stabilize the labor market for farm owners. Defend Our Health urges the Labor and Housing Committee to rewrite the sections noted above and to vote ought to pass.

Thank you,

Adam Nordell

Campaign Manager, Defend Our Health