

## **Testimony from the University of New England before the Committee on Housing and Economic Development**

LD 1023 Resolve to Reestablish and Continue the Work of the Blue Economy Task Force

Public Hearing: March 27, 2025

Senator Curry, Representative Gere, and members of the Joint Standing Committee on Housing and Economic Development, my name is Dr. Charles Tilburg, and I am the Doherty Chair of Marine Sciences Research and the Director of the School of Marine and Environmental Programs at the University of New England. I am submitting this testimony on behalf of UNE in support of LD 1023.

Thank you for the opportunity to address you today. I am pleased to serve as a member of the current Task Force and to contribute to the important work we have undertaken. The report we have presented is the result of a collaborative and consensus-driven process, developed over a short but highly productive timeframe. Our goal was to inspire interest, enthusiasm, and decisive action from our elected officials. I think that we have accomplished that goal. Our report highlights Maine's potential and provides a roadmap for where we should focus our efforts, identifying areas where we can double down or accelerate progress. By following these recommendations, Maine can better organize, innovate, and position itself to outcompete other states and countries in key sectors.

The Blue Economy Task Force, comprising a diverse group of stakeholders and informed by extensive public input, defined Maine's blue economy as a sustainable and equitable ocean economy that leverages innovation to create economic opportunities in coastal communities while protecting the environment. Maine's unique marine resources, skilled workforce, and research expertise position it to be a global leader in the blue economy, but realizing this potential requires accelerating public policy support and adopting the Task Force's recommendations to avoid losing ground to competing states and countries.

Other states like New Hampshire and Massachusetts are already coalescing around the Blue Economy. Our coastline (and therefore potential) dwarfs theirs, and we should not allow ourselves to be left behind. Challenges hindering Maine's blue economy include a lack of a coordinated strategy, slow permitting processes that discourage investment, and limited state and federal funding. Additional obstacles include difficulties in attracting and retaining a skilled workforce due to housing shortages and the growing risks posed by climate change, such as a warming Gulf of Maine and increased extreme weather events.

The University of New England has been training students in Marine Entrepreneurship, Marine Affairs, Aquaculture & Aquarium Science, and Sustainable Ecological Aquaculture to take advantage of this new economic landscape. In addition, we have a newly designed online master's program in Climate Change Leadership aimed at providing professionals in the blue economy with additional education to further their careers. Our enrollments are increasing, bringing more and more students to Maine. However, we are seeing too many of these graduates then leave the state to pursue professional opportunities elsewhere. Opportunities for growth in the blue economy include recirculating aquaculture systems, seaweed-based products—such as a kelp-based protein bar developed at the University of New England—and marine



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biotechnology and would continue to attract our graduates. This Task Force will continue to allow us to determine how to both grow our economy and keep our students in state.

This Task Force will continue to provide a unified perspective, an avenue to plan and strategize, and the means for Maine to compete with other coastal states and take advantage of the abundant resources that this great state has to offer. An increased blue economy would continue to attract students to our university and provide them with good-paying, fulfilling jobs when they graduate. For these reasons, we urge you to support LD 1023 to re-establish and continue the work of the Blue Economy Task Force. We would be honored to be a member and continue this important work. In addition, we recommend that the committee consider a friendly amendment to (1) refine the deliverables of the next Task Force to align more precisely with the recommendations in our report (including a blue economy education and training council) and (2) include a modest fiscal note to enable the consultant team to support the Task Force in executing its work effectively and efficiently, ensuring that we provide you with the necessary information in a timely manner.

Thank you for your consideration,

Charles Tilburg  
Director, School of Marine and Environmental Programs

Ed Cervone  
University of New England  
LD 1023

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Charles Tilburg

Director, School of Marine and Environmental Programs