

Tessa Burpee
Brewer
LD 357

Testimony in Opposition to LDS 357, 588 and 589
Tessa Burpee, Brewer

Senator Tipping, Representative Roeder and Members of the Labor Committee,

My name is Tessa Burpee. I grew up in Littleton, the fifth generation to be born and raised on my family's farm. I live in Brewer and am a part owner of our farm in Littleton. I am asking you to please oppose LDS 357, 588 and 589.

None of the bills you are considering today regarding farm labor take into consideration what it is really like to work on a farm in Maine or run a farm in Maine.

We grow nearly 400 acres of potatoes and have an organic greenhouse for vegetables. We have 4 full time employees and 5-8 part time employees. In the spring, we hire an additional 10 employees and in the fall, we hire 15 -18 employees for harvest. We pay above minimum wage in order to attract and retain good help throughout the year and we provide bonuses to incentivize people to stay for the duration of harvest in the fall. We value good workers and treat them well so they will stay with us.

These bills before you assume that farmers pay under the minimum wage and have a poor relationship with the people who work for us. On the contrary, they are like family. We pay well above the minimum wage (I don't know any farmers who don't) and provide incentives and bonuses throughout the year.

Harvest is a critical time. We start in mid September and finish in mid October. We are in a race against the weather and the changing seasons. Some weeks the hours are long and there is overtime, other weeks it rains or snows and we barely get 40 hours in.

If these bills pass, we will be forced to make difficult decisions — none of which will benefit our farm or the people who work for us. Other businesses in a free market respond to these kinds of increased regulations by raising the price of goods or cutting the cost of production (which includes reducing staff). As farmers, we do not have the luxury of raising our prices. We are already doing more for less each year and prices often do not even reflect the actual cost of doing business. We will have to save money by either taking away bonus checks or hiring additional workers throughout the year as well as during the spring and harvest so no one works more than 40 hours (even if they want to). Or we could consider paying just the minimum wage instead of above it. None of these options actually benefit the farm worker. And they certainly would not make us a more desirable business to work for.

This is the fall out from these types of bills. Workers never benefit.

On a personal note, my husband used to work for a grocery store chain. He was a full time assistant department manager. When the government started regulating that full time employees would have to receive certain benefits, the business responded by hiring more people to work 28 to 32 hours a week so that fewer people, including my husband, would be considered full time. We could no longer count on 40 hours a week. Sometimes it was less than 30. As newlyweds on a limited budget, we would have happily gone without the added benefits that were being mandated just to get the consistent 40 hours per week.

Good help is hard to come by, especially when the work load fluctuates with the weather and there is less to do in the winter. We are thankful for the great crew that we have and we treat them well. Please oppose the bills and let us continue to do so.