

Maine Dairy Industry Association
PO Box 5013 | 337 State Street
Augusta, ME 04432



Annie Watson, President
Dale Cole, Vice President
Jason Tessier, Secretary
Heath Miller, Treasurer
William Bullard, At Large

TESTIMONY BEFORE THE JOINT STANDING COMMITTEE ON LABOR

IN SUPPORT OF

LD952 An Act to Exempt Agricultural Employers and Employees from the Maine Paid Family and Medical Leave Benefits Program

Senator Tipping, Representative Roeder and Members of the Joint Standing Committee on Labor,

This testimony is presented on behalf of the Maine Dairy Industry Association. MDIA represents the 138 cow-dairy farms in the state shipping milk. Our farms are located in 15 of Maine's 16 counties. MDIA represents all of Maine's dairies, no matter the size or style of operation. Our producers range in size from five to 2,000 cows. We have 91 farms producing milk using conventional systems of production, and 47 using organic systems. Twelve of these farms are producer dealers, while the remaining 126 ship their milk to a processor. All but two of these farms are owned and managed by Maine families. Some are multi-generational families who have stewarded Maine's farmland for hundreds of years, while many are first generation farmers, just starting on their own family's farm journey. It is on behalf of these farms that we would like to submit this testimony in support of an agricultural exemption to the Paid Family Medical Leave (PFML) program.

As an organization run by dairy farmers, we are deeply aware of the unique challenges faced by agricultural workers and employers, particularly when it comes to maintaining the delicate balance between caring for employees and ensuring the continued operation of the farm. We urge you to consider the need for this exemption to protect the agricultural sector from undue economic strain.

Agriculture is unlike many other industries. It is a sector that is highly dependent on the seasons, the weather, and the hands-on labor of a dedicated workforce. Farmers are small business owners who operate on thin margins and cannot afford the same kind of flexibility that other industries might have. Unlike large corporations with ample resources, Maine's dairy farms face limited capacity for hiring temporary workers to cover absent employees, particularly in the case of extended medical leave.

Farming is subject to strict seasonal cycles. The loss of a worker due to family medical leave during planting, harvesting, or other critical times can have a devastating impact on the farm's productivity. These are not flexible, nine-to-five jobs, but rather ones that require constant

attention to meet seasonal deadlines. A mandatory paid leave program, without exemption for agriculture, would put immense pressure on farms already struggling to remain viable.

The agricultural workforce is already in short supply. We have a labor shortage and our farms are already struggling to fill the required positions on our farms. Requiring agricultural employers to comply with mandates that do not consider the unique needs of our workforce could lead to further labor shortages or drive workers away from the industry altogether. In many cases, farm families rely on each other to meet the demands of daily operations. Paid family medical leave could inadvertently penalize family labor, which is integral to the functioning of small farms. The agricultural exemption would ensure that farm families can continue to care for their own without the burden of excessive regulatory compliance.

A healthy, sustainable agricultural industry is essential for ensuring food security and economic growth in rural communities. Policies that unintentionally harm farmers through increased operational costs or reduced productivity could have long-term negative consequences, both for the farmers themselves and the communities they serve.

In conclusion, while paid family medical leave is a vital policy for many industries, it is essential to recognize the unique circumstances of agriculture. A thoughtful exemption for agricultural businesses would support the sustainability of small farms, protect the livelihoods of farm families, and maintain the stability of our food system. We ask that you consider the challenges facing agricultural workers and their employers and approve the exemption for this vital sector.

Thank you for your consideration.