

Senator Curry, Representative Gere, and Members of the Housing and Economic Development Committee,

My name is Monique Coombs, and I am the Director of Community Programs at the Maine Coast Fishermen's Association. I'm here today to express strong support for this legislation, which provides a necessary and time-sensitive exemption from the "reasonable return" standard for shoreland zoning variances in Harpswell. This bill will enable fishing families and waterfront-dependent businesses to rebuild their damaged docks, wharves, and fish houses following the devastating storms in January 2024.



In the immediate aftermath of the January 9–13 storm, the Maine Coast Fishermen's Association, along with partners from FEMA and StrengthenME, mobilized quickly to assess damage, provide emergency assistance, and connect fishermen with available resources. I personally spent days in Harpswell and surrounding coastal communities speaking with fishermen, walking storm-damaged properties, and helping families navigate the trauma and uncertainty left in the wake of the floods.

What we saw was heartbreaking: bait shacks torn from foundations and wharves destroyed by surging tides. These aren't recreational structures. They are the backbone of Maine's commercial fishing industry; critical infrastructure that enables harvesters to land seafood, store gear, and support coastal economies.

Through our FEMA-funded outreach, we helped connect fishermen with available disaster assistance. However, we soon realized that many faced an unexpected legal roadblock: the need to obtain a variance under state and local ordinance rules requiring proof that their land can yield "no reasonable return." Maine courts have interpreted this standard narrowly meaning that even storm-damaged working waterfronts, because of their proximity to the ocean, may be denied the ability to rebuild simply because the property retains hypothetical recreational value.

This makes no sense. These working waterfront properties aren't valuable because they're pretty. They're valuable because they allow people to work, to fish, and to sustain their families. Without timely action, this flawed standard could result in federal funds sitting unused, repairs delayed or denied, and the further erosion of our already threatened working waterfronts.

The MCFA believes this bill is a sensible and narrowly tailored solution. It doesn't change the variance process across the state, it simply creates a specific exemption for those directly impacted by the January disaster in Harpswell. It respects local control by requiring each variance petition to be reviewed by the local board of appeals. And most importantly, it gives our fishermen and coastal business owners a fighting chance to recover.

We also respectfully suggest that the Legislature consider expanding this exemption to other coastal municipalities with active commercial fishing infrastructure that suffered damage from the same January storms. Many fishing communities across the state face similar barriers and urgently need relief in order to access federal recovery funds and rebuild critical working waterfront facilities.

If the Maine Legislature is serious about supporting working waterfronts, we urge you to pass this bill, and to consider similar support for other coastal towns that depend on commercial fishing for their economic and cultural survival.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'M. Coombs', written over a faint, large-scale illustration of a fish.

Monique Coombs
Director of Community Programs