

Mary Ellen Chadbourne
Harmony Free Fair
LD 2096

LD2096 January 27, 2026

Good afternoon, Senator Talbot-Ross, Representative Plueker, and distinguished members of the Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry Committee.

My name is Mel Chadbourne. I am a Trustee of the Harmony Free Fair in Harmony, Maine, where I have served for 27 years in leadership roles, including Vice-president and multiple Trustee terms.

Today, I submit this testimony in opposition to LD 2096, specifically Section 1, Lines 11–26, and Section 5. Changing the definition of an “agricultural fair” is unnecessary and harmful. Maine’s agricultural fairs have operated successfully under the current definition for decades. The proposed changes would fundamentally alter that framework and would disproportionately impact small, community-based fairs like the Harmony Free Fair.

The agricultural landscape in rural Maine has changed dramatically. In our region, there are no longer any 4-H groups, and the last remaining dairy farm closed just last year. What remains are primarily small, backyard farms. These individuals rely on the Harmony Free Fair for education, demonstrations, and connection to agricultural traditions. While we do offer some animal competitions, we do not have the local farm base, youth infrastructure, or resources to meet the requirements outlined in LD 2096 as currently proposed.

Mandating competitions across multiple livestock and poultry species is not feasible for fairs with limited exhibitor pools. Requiring three or more youth agriculture events would present an additional challenge. These requirements do not strengthen agricultural education; instead, they create barriers that many fairs cannot overcome. In practice, this legislation would force at least one of Maine’s 25 agricultural fairs to close and could threaten the survival of many small-sized fairs statewide. In 2025, the Harmony Free Fair celebrated its 77th anniversary. Under the proposed redefinition, reaching our 78th year would be uncertain.

The Harmony Free Fair is more than an event—it is a deeply rooted community tradition. Families who have moved away plan their visits home around fair week. Neighbors reconnect. This past year, a mother brought her one-day-old baby to the fair, explaining that she had never missed one and did not intend to start now. The fair provides something increasingly rare: face-to-face connection in a world dominated by screens.

Friends and families gather to enjoy agricultural education, demonstrations, modest competitions, affordable local entertainment, and a strong sense of community. Each fair in Maine reflects the character and needs of its region. That diversity is not a weakness; it is the reason Maine’s fairs endure.

Hundreds of volunteers dedicate their time and energy to preserving these fairs, which remain Maine’s most accessible agricultural education entities. What we have works and redefining agricultural fairs in a way that excludes long-standing, successful models is unnecessary and damaging.

I am unable to attend today due to illness, but I welcome the opportunity to answer any questions. Thank you for your time, consideration, and continued support of Maine’s 25 agricultural fairs.

Respectfully submitted,

Mary Ellen (Mel) Chadbourne
Trustee, Harmony Free Fair