



TESTIMONY NEITHER FOR NOR AGAINST

LD 2089 An Act to Amend the Law Governing Agricultural Labor Housing Standards

Senator Tipping, Representative Roeder and Honorable Members of the Committee on Labor:

My name is Julie Ann Smith, and I am testifying today on behalf of the Maine Farmers Coalition, representing farms across Maine that provide housing for agricultural workers as part of their operations. The Coalition was established in 2023 by farmers who recognized the importance of advocating for state policies that ensure sustainable growth and protection of Maine's farming industry.

We strongly support the focus on agricultural labor housing and are committed to ensuring that workers have safe, healthy, and dignified living conditions. We would like to clarify that our testimony is not meant to undermine the importance of housing standards; they are undeniably essential. Instead, our focus is on how changes to these standards are implemented and the real-world costs that these changes impose on farms.

For many Maine farms, providing worker housing is already one of the most expensive and complex aspects of their operation. Housing is often seasonal, located in rural areas, and constructed or adapted over time using scarce capital. Even modest regulatory changes—such as altered space requirements, facility specifications, or infrastructure standards—can trigger costly renovations, require professional services, or render existing housing unusable.

These costs are not theoretical. Farmers routinely invest tens or hundreds of thousands of dollars in housing to comply with existing requirements, often without access to grants or financing. When standards change without legislative review, those investments can be undermined overnight. For a small or mid-sized farm operating on thin margins, an unexpected capital expense can determine whether housing remains available at all.

LD 2089 gives the Department of Labor authority to issue future rules implementing new or revised housing standards. Given the potential financial and operational impacts of those rules, the Maine Farmers Coalition believes that routine technical rulemaking does not provide sufficient oversight or accountability.

We strongly urge the Committee to amend LD 2089 to require that any rules adopted under this legislation be classified as major substantive rules, requiring legislative review and approval. This is particularly important where rules may impose new costs, alter inspection practices, or affect a farm's ability to house workers during critical production periods.

From a farmer's perspective, legislative review provides an essential safeguard. It ensures that policymakers fully understand the economic and practical impacts of proposed standards before they take effect and allows for course correction if unintended consequences emerge. This process benefits not only farmers, but workers as well, by promoting durable, well-considered policy rather than frequent or unpredictable regulatory change.

We are also concerned about inspection authority and enforcement consistency. Housing standards that evolve through routine rulemaking can lead to shifting interpretations over time. For farmers, inconsistent enforcement creates risk, delays, and added costs—particularly when compliance determines whether workers can occupy housing at all.

For these reasons, the Maine Farmers Coalition respectfully asks the Committee to amend LD 2089 to ensure that any implementing rules are adopted as major substantive rules and returned to the Legislature for approval. This approach would maintain worker protections while providing the transparency, stability, and predictability that Maine farms need to continue offering housing.

Thank you for your time and for your consideration of the economic realities facing Maine farmers. We look forward to working with you to develop policies that ensure Maine's agriculture thrives in a competitive global market.