MAINE'S PUBLIC UNIVERSITIES
UNIVERSITY OF MAINE SYSTEM

DATE: March 19, 2026
TO: Joint Standing Committee on Agriculture, Conservation, & Forestry
FROM: Sam Warren, UMS Chief External & Governmental Affairs Officer
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RE: **LD 473, Resolve, Directing the Commissioner of Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry to Quarantine Potatoes Capable of Carrying Harmful Plant Disease or Insect Infestation**

Senator Talbot Ross, Representative Pluecker, and distinguished members of the Joint Standing Committee on Agriculture, Conservation, and Forestry: I write on behalf of the University of Maine — the state's only R1 research university and a proud land-grant institution.

For more than a century, the Maine Agricultural and Forest Experiment Station's (MAFES) 425-acre Aroostook Farm has been the heart of UMaine's agricultural research to benefit the state's potato industry, including breeding innovations like the Caribou Russet — now the top seed potato variety planted in Maine. Thanks to the success of this high-yield spud, which UMaine researchers intentionally bred to be disease-resistant and tolerant of weather-related stress, Maine is one of only three states where potato production expanded between 2000 and 2022. The industry now has a $1.3 billion annual economic impact in the state, supporting more than 6,500 jobs, according to a recent UMaine report.

We are grateful to the Legislature, the Maine Department of Agriculture, Conservation, & Forestry, and the industry for the ongoing partnerships and investment that make our impact possible. This includes the recent modernization of Aroostook Farm, funded by the Maine Jobs & Recovery Plan, the Maine Potato Board, and Farm Credit East, ACA. These improvements will accelerate our development of future varieties and the workforce needed to ensure the resilience of Maine's top agricultural commodity.

UMaine's breeding program depends on cooperation with industry, regulators, and researchers across the country and even beyond. Developing a new potato variety like the Caribou Russet typically takes 10-12 years, requiring evaluation of multiple potential varieties in the pipeline at a time.

There is currently no known presence of the Columbia Root Knot Nematode in the state. However, if harmful nematodes are brought here in the future, it could be devastating to the potato industry — which is almost entirely based in a single county (Aroostook) — and also to our UMaine breeding program, as they spread quickly and can take decades to eradicate

from the soil. Specifically, if nematodes were introduced here, it could limit our university's ability to participate in regional and national unified potato testing trials that are essential to our breeding program and to the sustainability and growth of the industry, as is currently the case for our colleagues in Idaho, Washington, and Oregon.

We agree that the Department's Chapter 30 rules, which have not been substantively updated since the 1990s, are in need of revision. We encourage that to be undertaken through a transparent, thoughtful, science- and stakeholder-informed process that university researchers would welcome the opportunity to meaningfully participate in.

UMaine is committed to supporting a healthy, sustainable potato industry. Our university is working every day to strengthen and grow this vital sector and the rural farms, jobs, and economic opportunity it supports — including through world-class variety development, pest and plant disease research, and our Cooperative Extension Plant Disease Diagnostic Lab, which is an APHIS Nematode Certified Lab as well as being the Northeast Regional Center of the National Plant Disease Diagnostic Network.

Please let me know if the university can provide additional information to inform your consideration of this important legislation.