

Testimony of Katie Ashley, Resident of Orono and University of Maine Graduate Student Representative to the UMS Board of Trustees, In Support of the Funding Provided in the Governor's FY24-25 Budget Proposal for the University of Maine System – Feb. 13, 2023

Good afternoon Senators Rotundo and Rafferty, Representatives Sachs and Brennan, and members of the Joint Standing Committees on Appropriations & Financial Affairs and Education & Cultural Affairs. My name is Katie Ashley, and I am a second year PhD student in plant science at the University of Maine. My research, which your investment in the University of Maine System and the Maine Economic Improvement Fund supports, currently focuses on innovative ways to improve soil health and consequently increase potato yields for farmers, including those in Maine.

I am originally from Florida and grew up in a fifth-generation citrus-growing family. I still love soil under my fingernails as much now as I did growing up. However, challenges within the citrus industry eventually resulted in my entire family shifting into other sectors. Like so many young people raised in agricultural families, I too was encouraged to consider a career in another field. So, I earned a bachelor's degree in biology with a minor in environmental studies and planned to work in the health field. Following the completion of my undergraduate degree and work in an orthopedic surgeon's office, I served in both the Peace Corps and AmeriCorps, before deciding it was time to return to school.

Before I came here to attend UMaine, I had never even visited New England, but the opportunity to conduct meaningful hands-on research in Maine's iconic wild blueberry industry was an opportunity too good to be true. To say my family was surprised is an understatement. But Maine felt right and was a nearly natural fit for myself and my partner. I earned my master's degree in plant pathology, while at the same time living in a warm and welcoming community. Following the completion of my master's degree, we moved away so I could work at North Carolina State University Cooperative Extension. However, when the desire returned to pursue another graduate degree, the decision was easy, even if it required another thousand-mile move. I am now pursuing a PhD with hopes to continue serving Maine's agriculture industry through a career with UMaine Cooperative Extension.

At UMaine, I've been able to carry out independent research, and explore innovative solutions for agricultural problems, including a project which I am particularly excited about that unites the blue and green economies here in Maine and utilizes recovered lobster shell waste and repurposes it as a soil amendment to improve plant growth, and potentially suppress soilborne diseases. This is exciting work and exemplifies the potential solutions that can be unlocked within our state with your support of public university education and research.

My UMaine education is giving me the opportunity to explore my curiosities, cultivate my natural affinity to agriculture and do great things for Maine. The funds you provide to UMS to keep public higher education and world class research learning affordable and accessible are critical components of developing the workforce within Maine and strengthening innovation within essential industries, such as agriculture, which feeds our growing population, sustains our natural resources, and supports jobs especially in rural communities.

Like so many other graduate students I represent to the System's Board of Trustees, I am appreciative of the opportunities UMaine has provided me thanks to your past investment and I look forward to give back to this state by living and working here after commencement. I urge you to expand investment in UMS education and research as the Governor proposed in her budget so that others, and Maine, can benefit from our incredible public university system.

Thank you for your time.