

**Testimony of Jeannie M. Tapley, Director of Operations, Maine Potato Board to
the Joint Standing Committee on Labor and Housing
April 18, 2023**

**LD 525 – An Act to Protect Farm Workers by Allowing Them to Organize for the
Purposes of Collective Bargaining**

Senator Tipping, Representative Roeder and members of the Labor and Housing Committee; I am Jeannie Tapley, Director of Operations for the Maine Potato Board (MPB) and would like to express the MPB's opposition to LD 525: An Act to Protect Farm Workers by Allowing Them to Organize for the Purposes of Collective Bargaining.

We are here in opposition to LD 525, which if passed would be very detrimental to all agriculture in this state. As I was preparing this testimony, I am plagued with the question of why this bill is thought to be needed. When a farmer hires an employee, that employee knows what the job duties are and what the compensation for performing those duties will be. If an issue arises, the Maine Department of Labor is available to help employees and employers to resolve those issues. Unionization is not needed and would cause another undue burden and regulation on our agricultural community.

This bill gives the perception that Maine agriculture mistreats their employees and this simply is not true. Most employees on family farms are treated as just that – family. In surveying our growers, the minimum average hourly wage for full time employees is \$21.30; the highest being around \$28.00, which is far greater than minimum wage and on top of that wage, most farmers provide benefits to their employees such as health and dental plans, paid time off, company vehicles, etc.

Maine potato growers understand how crucial it is to hire quality staff and do their very best to keep those employees; collective bargaining would destroy that relationship. Passing this bill allows outside organizations to dictate what is allowed on family farms that have no invested interest other than collecting dues. This bill will simply drive a wedge between farmers and the employees.

In Maine, we have a very limited time in which to raise and harvest crops; in the potato industry, that is approximately 120 days. Agriculture is also faced with factors we have no control over such as the weather; we cannot plant a crop until ground conditions are suitable, we cannot plant in wet soil conditions and if it rains, cultivation and management of the crop during the summer is impacted. Harvesting can only begin when the crop has reached maturity and again cannot be done in wet conditions.

If unionization is allowed for farm workers, this could cause an interruption at crucial production times, as well as the potential to cost small farm families thousands of dollars if there arises a need for mediation, arbitration, and legal fees. Small farms cannot afford the time lost with their crops as well as the added costs this bill could cause. Farmers already have a very low profit margin and this bill could essentially drive up the cost of food for all in Maine.

The potato industry in Maine has always taken great pride in what we do, how we take care of the land, and provide healthy quality food to Maine residents and beyond; this also includes taking care of our employees. If LD 525 passes many potato growers will have to make hard business decisions to ensure they can continue to operate; in some cases that will mean rather than facing unionization, they may look to federal programs such as H2A migrant workers instead of the local workforce or to invest in equipment that will allow them to hire fewer employees. I also worry with the current inflation on diesel, fertilizer, electricity, etc. that some of our small farm families will be faced with the hard decision on whether to get done farming because they will not be able to afford staying in operation.

We ask that you vote ought not to pass on LD 525 and show your support for agriculture in Maine and the staff that those farm families employ. I will be happy to answer any questions you have; I will be available for the work session and can provide any additional information necessary.