



April 20, 2023

The Honorable Stacy Brenner, Senate Chair  
The Honorable Lori Gramlich, House Chair  
Joint Standing Committee on Environment and Natural Resources  
Cross Building, Room 216  
Augusta, ME 04333

Senator Brenner, Representative Gramlich, Honorable members of the Joint Committee on Environment and Natural Resources:

My name is Sebastian Belle and I am the Executive Director of the Maine Aquaculture Association (MAA) and the current president of the National Aquaculture Association (NAA). The MAA is the oldest state aquaculture association in the country. We represent Maine's aquatic farmers that raise finfish, shellfish and sea vegetables. Our farmers annually produce over 100 million dollars in farm gate revenue and directly employ roughly 700 Maine citizens year-round. We purchase goods and services from over 400 Maine businesses and our total economic impact is roughly 150 million dollars annually.

**I stand before you today to testify in opposition to LD 508 "Resolve, Directing the Department of Environmental Protection to Review Its Environmental Permitting Laws".**

Over the last 30 years, we have had 24 policy studies on aquaculture in the state. Most of those studies have focused on aquaculture regulations and have come as a result of political pressure from groups opposed to aquaculture and working waterfronts. Typically, the drive for a "study" is linked to a controversial lease application and the fact that opponents do not believe the existing permitting and leasing system guarantees a denial of that specific lease in their "back yard." This proposal is no different and is driven by the American Aquafarms proposal in Frenchman Bay. A proposal, incidentally, that did not even qualify under existing state law as legitimate enough to be accepted for the state's rigorous leasing application process. If it had qualified, the existing regulatory system would have ensured that proposal had a fair hearing and most likely would not have been approved because it would have failed to meet a number of regulatory criteria. Obviously, state agencies cannot go on record saying that before they consider an application because it would compromise their ability to legally defend a denial of the project application. The Maine aquaculture regulatory system, whether it considers a land or ocean-based proposal, is one of the strictest in the world. We do not need to "adjust" the existing system to ensure "bad" proposals don't make it through the existing system; they won't. That's why we only have 156 farms, 25 of which are finfish farms. That's why the Maine regulatory system is viewed as a gold standard and why regulators come from other states and all over the world to learn more about how Maine manages aquaculture.

LD 508 directs the DEP to consider whether on-water aquaculture should be subject to the same or similar regulatory regime as land-based aquaculture. Marine and terrestrial ecosystems are different. Current land use and marine resource management methods acknowledge those differences and use tools that are designed to be effective in fundamentally different types of ecosystems.



Trying to impose land management methods on aquatic ecosystems makes no sense and may result in serious unintended ecological and social impacts. Currently, aquaculture operations on land and in marine waters are held to the same high regulatory standards with respect to discharges into aquatic environments. In addition, aquaculture operations in marine waters are held to higher standards than those on land with respect to conflicts with other users, impacts on navigation, ability to finance a project and impacts on surrounding wildlife habitat or recreational uses. Imposing land use standards on marine leases may actually decrease the stringency of regulatory oversight and force agencies to use standards not designed for, or effective, in aquatic ecosystems.

LD 508 will become a tool for paid activists who are campaigning to restrict coastal communities' ability to diversify their economic base and preserve their working waterfront heritage. Working on behalf of wealthy coastal landowners, these activists are intentionally using scare tactics and misleading information to pit waterfront groups against each other and pressure elected officials into believing that Maine's regulatory system is not strict enough. These same groups are the ones who have repeatedly, and unsuccessfully, pushed for study groups in front of the legislators on the Marine Resources Committee. I would encourage you to reach out to your fellow legislators who have been on that committee for some time and get their thoughts on why these special interest groups keep pushing for studies. If nothing else, the makeup of the working group proposed in LD 508 should raise concerns. The bill establishes a working group comprised of multiple (17) "stakeholders," only two of which come from aquaculture. It is intentionally a "stacked deck" and is designed to ensure that aquaculture is in the minority and discriminated against in the process. Imagine proposing a working group to examine how the lobster community is regulated with 17 members, only two of which come from the lobster fishery!

Finally, the bill will require that three state agencies commit significant resources and staff time to produce yet another study. Study commissions take tax dollars and divert agency resources away from their regulatory responsibilities. The MAA is deeply concerned that the agencies will not be able to enforce existing regulations while diverting resources to staff a study that is politically motivated and driven by concerns about an ill-conceived project that in all likelihood would never have made it through the permitting process. It is certainly no coincidence that the diversion of agency staff away from the consideration of lease and permit applications would help the anti-aquaculture activists achieve their goal of stopping the growth of aquaculture.

We have a simple choice to make here in Maine. Do we or do we not value our working waterfront traditions, and are we willing to preserve those in the face of rapid climate change and coastal gentrification? Over 80% of the seafood consumed in the United States is imported. Of that 80%, over 56% is produced by aquaculture. Those farms in other countries do not have to comply with the same level of environmental, labor and safety regulations we do here in Maine. If we continue to impose more and more regulatory complexity and uncertainty on the aquaculture sector, entrepreneurs will be unwilling to risk capital, and the cost of doing aquaculture in Maine will become so high that we are unable to compete with those foreign farms. Ironically, the demand for seafood will then be met by farms with few environmental restrictions and we will literally bear the responsibility for increasing



global environmental impacts. We will also decrease our ability to produce local, healthy food and take away opportunities for young people along our coast. I have no doubt that is not the intention of the bills' sponsors, but that is what will actually happen.

Maine has a long tradition of producing high quality, healthy seafood. Maine seafood is an iconic part of the Maine brand and Maine aquaculture products have earned their place as part of that brand. We grow our products directly in the environment and rely on clean water and healthy marine ecosystems to ensure the health and welfare of our fish, shellfish and sea vegetables. Over the last 46 years, MAA has lobbied over a thousand hours to protect water quality and our environment. We have done that because it is the right thing to do, but also because our businesses rely on a clean and healthy environment. Please help us continue to build the Maine brand and defend Maines working waterfronts. **Vote "OUGHT NOT TO PASS" on LD 508.** I thank you for your attention and patience and would be glad to answer any questions you may have.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "S. Belle".

Sebastian M. Belle  
Executive Director