

131st Legislature
Senate of
Maine
Senate District 24

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Testimony of Senator Eloise Vitelli presenting
LD 1552, An Act to Create the Lobster Innovation Fund
Before the Joint Standing Committee on Marine Resources
April 27, 2023

Senator Reny, Representative Hepler, and esteemed members of the Joint Standing Committee on Marine Resources, my name is Eloise Vitelli, and I proudly represent Senate District 24, which includes all of Sagadahoc County and Dresden. Today I am pleased to present legislation that aims to directly support Maine lobster fishermen, LD 1552, “An Act to Create the Lobster Innovation Fund.”

Maine lobster fishermen are stewards of our coastal waters; they have repeatedly done whatever was required to protect the environment, the fishery, and other species--including right whales.

My bill is a direct response to the delay of federal regulations, regulations that many fishing families feel threaten their livelihoods. You see, Maine’s industry supports *science-based* protections of both the Endangered Species Act and the Marine Mammal Protection Act and they understand *real* solutions are possible. What has frustrated many are bureaucratic policies that do not adequately consider what is happening on the ground – or in the water. Over the past several years, many fishermen have come to terms with the fact that some level of innovation will be needed to ensure the future of the fishery; those changes should be led by Mainers, and those in the industry, not just the federal government.

I began discussing ideas for this bill before the NOAA’s proposed rules were passed and challenged in federal court and before our federal delegation and Governor Mills worked to circumvent these provisions by adding language to federal spending legislation, which delayed for six years new federal fishing regulations aimed at preventing right whale entanglements. I began looking for tangible ways to directly support the lobster industry, something I believe is in the State’s best interest.

I heard from Maine fishermen that whatever changes are called for need to be based in science, in real life practice, and not based on one-sided rules. Technical solutions for Maine’s lobster industry need to be affordable, convenient, safe, practical, and scalable. If lobstermen are not part of the testing and research phase, no amount of investment in new gear will prove successful in preserving the fishery - or other species.

This fund intends to bring them in, engage them in the process, and compensate their time, energy and expertise for doing so.

The goal of this bill is to support lobstering families over the next six years of transition. The Legislature would establish the Lobster Innovation Fund to provide stipends to holders of Class I, Class II or Class III lobster fishing licenses to participate in the testing of new lobster fishing technologies. This legislation appropriates one-time funds of \$1 million in each year of the biennium to the fund.

I expect other coastal legislators and Maine DMR to outline proposals and bills this session that would complement this fund. We must look closely at how Maine is investing in this industry in this moment, through legal support, through gear development, through testing—and we must ensure funds get directly to the fishermen as they take on the challenges ahead.

Thank you for your time and your attention to this matter. I will answer any questions you may have.

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

Eloise Vitelli

Senate Majority Leader, Senate District 24
Sagadahoc County and Dresden