

January 11, 2024

Alison Feibel, Sr. Resource Biologist
Acadian Seaplants Maine
afeibel@acadian.ca

Joint Standing Committee on Marine Resources

RE: LD 2003 – An Act to Protect Access to Maine’s Intertidal Zone

Senator Reny, Representative Hepler, and members of the Joint Standing Committee on Marine Resources, my name is Alison Feibel, a resident of Belfast and Senior Resource Biologist for Acadian Seaplants. I appreciate this opportunity to speak to you today neither for nor against LD 2003, An Act to Protect Access to Maine’s Intertidal Zone.

I acknowledge the current status of this bill and despite its fate, I want to stress the importance of the issues it raised. It is important to clarify that the question was never whether rockweed is a fish or not, but rather whether it’s harvesting should be considered as fishing. Title 12 Section 6001, defines the verb fish as “to take or attempt to take any marine organism by any method or means.” That same section defines a marine organism as “any animal, plant or other life that inhabits water below head of tide.” Seaweed is not a plant. Seaweed is not a fish, but seaweed is certainly a marine organism and by definition, its harvesting is considered as fishing.

The commercial history of rockweed harvesting in Maine dates to the early 1900s with farmers landing 5,000 tons in Penobscot bay alone. The latest landing data for all seaweed species in Maine was just over 7,000 tons in 2021 according to the Department of Marine Resources. It is estimated that the Gulf of Maine contains over 1 million tons of rockweed, which means less than 1% of Maine’s rockweed was harvested that year.

Rockweed is a productive seaweed and therefore beds recover very quickly after harvest. And after decades of harvesting, studies show that there are no long-term impacts of harvesting on the height, biomass, or morphology of rockweed. A study from the University of Maine published just this week found there was no evidence that rockweed harvesting affected bird visits to beds. There are many studies that explore the impacts of harvesting and the overall consensus is that the impacts of harvesting, if any, are small and short lived.

More research can always, and should, be done. The industry here in Maine continues to work with researchers across the state to further that body of work. The industry also continues to push for increased regulations within the seaweed fishery. But in its current status, as a privately owned resource, it is difficult to implement further regulations. As a state owned and regulated resource, rockweed would have more protections.

A Fishery Management Plan for Rockweed was published in 2014. It was developed by stakeholders across this field, many of whom are in the room today. Implementation of this management plan would provide ample protection for rockweed in Maine. In fact, implementation of the FMP would make Maine a global leader in the regulation of seaweed harvesting. But this is only possible IF the legislature helps restore public access to intertidal seaweed.

Thank you for the opportunity to comment and I look forward to working with you on this issue in the future.