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## **TESTIMONY BEFORE THE JOINT STANDING COMMITTEE ON LABOR AND HOUSING**

**in support of**

***“LD2273 An Act to Establish a State Minimum Hourly Wage for Agricultural Workers”***

Good afternoon Senator Tipping, Representative Roeder, and members of Joint Standing Committee on Labor and Housing,

Thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today. My name is Annie Watson, I am an organic dairy farmer from Whitefield, here today on behalf of the Maine Dairy Industry Association, of which I serve as President. We wish to express our organization’s support for LD 2273.

MDIA represents the 146 cow-dairy farms in the state shipping milk. Our farms are located in 15 of Maine’s 16 counties. MDIA represents all of Maine’s dairies, no matter the size or style of operation. It is on behalf of these farms that we would first like to say how much we value the process through which this legislation was formed. We are grateful to Governor Mills for convening the formal stakeholder group to discuss the challenges and opportunities for our agricultural labor force. We appreciate the collective effort of everyone involved in the Agricultural Worker Minimum Wage Committee and are thankful to have had a seat at the table. The group considered the perspectives of farmworkers, farm employers, and advocates, and was a testament to the ability for these sometimes varying perspectives to come together to work towards a solution.

Our dairy farms are the backbone of our rural communities. Maine’s dairy farms are diverse in their size, style of production and ownership structures, which results in varying methods of employment. Many of our farms have no helpers other than family members, while some have large crews to manage. These differences are what make up our vibrant collection of small businesses, yet we all share common challenges. Whether you are a farmer milking your cows on your own; or you are a member of a multi-generational farm that has seen momentous growth and depends on much hired help, the labor requirements are the same- the cows need to be milked twice (or sometimes three times) a day, 365 days a year. This is a commitment that, we can all agree, is unlike no other. It should mean fair compensation. The individuals who farm alongside some of us are absolutely vital to our farm and families’ way of life.

Unfortunately for many of our farms, there is not any financial flexibility available after paying all the increasing farm expenses for hiring additional help, and many farmers find the physical aspects of the job too much to bear. As price takers, there is little we can do to change what we are paid for the product we produce, and yet we are always striving to become more efficient.

Our farms are as unique as the people we have working on them, and we hope that this legislation will continue to confirm our industry's commitment to being part of the solution for a thriving agricultural community.

Thank you for your time and I am happy to answer any questions.