



BELFAST COMMUNITY CO-OP

Owned by you. Food for all.

Testimony for the Joint Standing Committee on Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry in Support of LD 468 An Act to Address Food Insecurity by Helping Maine Residents Access Locally Produced Food

Sponsored by Senator Henry Ingwersen

March 3, 2025

Senator Talbot Ross, Representative Pluecker, and esteemed members of the Joint Standing Committee on Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry, my name is Heather Q Hay and I am the IT Manager at Belfast Community Co-op. I am a resident of Belfast, Maine. I am testifying here today in support of LD 468.

In 2016, I joined the team that assisted in making the Belfast Community Co-op the first grocery retailer to accept Maine Harvest Bucks, now Farm Fresh Rewards, which encourages shoppers to spend their SNAP dollars on healthy products by providing financial incentives on fruits and vegetables. We were able to create an accessible system for other businesses to easily onboard the program, which now is available in over a dozen stores statewide. This program made an immediate and meaningful impact in Waldo County, which historically has one of the highest poverty rates in the state. As we are also a farming community, we were able to directly support our local farmers even more, in a new and measurable way.

In 2023, as the nation faced the benefits cliff for EBT SNAP benefits, Belfast Community Co-op became the first co-op in the state to become a WIC vendor. In addition to fresh fruits and vegetables from away, we provide over 350 unique, local fruits and vegetables that qualify for WIC purchases. We also worked with the WIC office to add Organic Valley milk, a regional milk cooperative that includes several Maine dairy farms, to the Approved Product List. Our WIC shoppers are often SNAP and Farm Fresh Rewards participants as well - so we are able to provide healthy, local options to them in a variety of ways.

In 2024, at our store alone, Maine families afforded 924 lbs of local apples, 746 lbs of local potatoes, and 1,275 lbs of local carrots thanks to the Farm Fresh Rewards program.

At the Belfast Community Co-op, we prioritize supporting a thriving, just and sustainable local economy - while also meeting the needs of our community. Serving those who face food insecurity is a large part of why I personally work at the co-op and something that everyone in our organization dedicates themselves to.

Committing to stable funding for Maine's food incentive programs, by approving LD 468, ensures that Maine dollars support Maine farmers and families, and our community grows stronger together.

Sincerely,

Heather Q Hay

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