

Senator Curry, Representative Gere, and Members of the Joint Standing Committee on Housing and Economic Development,

My name is Meg Krieger, and I am a Workforce Development Specialist at Educate Maine, a statewide, business-led nonprofit organization focused on education. One of the programs we run is *Aquaculture Pioneers*, a summer-long, paid, on-the-job learning experience at participating farms across the Downeast, Mid-Coast, and Southern Coastal regions.

I am here today to testify in support of LD1023, for the same reason the Aquaculture Pioneers program was launched: to support the growth of Maine's aquaculture industry, continue cultivating talent, and strengthen Maine's Blue Economy.

This year marks the fourth year of our *Aquaculture Pioneers* program, which has been certified as a Pre-apprenticeship and is now directly connected to the Maine Aquaculture Association and the Gulf of Maine Research Institute's competitive Aquaculture Technician Apprenticeship program. Through this program, we provide participants with on-the-job training at farms across the coast, while also introducing them to leaders in Maine's vibrant aquaculture industry, many of whom are part of the Blue Economy Task Force.

The Aquaculture Apprenticeship program itself is a joint venture launched in 2023 by the Gulf of Maine Research Institute, the Maine Aquaculture Association, and Educate Maine. It was developed after a study found about 884 people working in the field [in Maine] as of 2022, with potential growth for up to 1,450 jobs by 2030, but only if aquaculture businesses can find the kinds of workers they need.

As LD1023 recommends, developing education and training programs that are directly relevant to Maine's Blue Economy workforce is crucial. Our Pre-apprenticeship and the full-time Apprenticeship programs are the first of their kind in the country, and they are highly sought-after in Maine. We need to create more opportunities to meet the growing demand and support continued industry growth.

For just 18 positions this summer, we've already received over 70 applications from Maine high school students, out-of-state career transitioners, and University of Maine graduates eager to apply their marine science degrees. Additionally, we received close to 30 employer applications to host these 18 participants. This consistent interest in *Aquaculture Pioneers* and other aquaculture-based experiential learning opportunities across the state highlights the increasing demand for skilled workers in this sector, both from learners and employers.

These farmhand positions are just the tip of the iceberg. Anecdotally, we have heard from apprentices and pre-apprentices who are actively seeking opportunities for further professional development to grow their careers within the industry. They are eager for training in areas like

grant writing, business management, and finance to either help grow the farm they're working for or eventually start their own operations.

Supporting LD1023 is a critical step in ensuring that Maine has the resources and infrastructure needed to cultivate a skilled workforce and foster industry growth. I urge you to pass this bill to help continue the momentum of workforce development in this vital sector.