



March 27, 2025

The Honorable Denise Tepler, Senate Chair
The Honorable Allison Hepler, House Chair
Joint Standing Committee on Marine Resources
State House, Room 202
Augusta, ME. 04333

Senator Tepler, Representative Hepler, Honorable members of the Joint Committee on Marine Resources:

My name is Sebastian Belle and I am the Executive Director of the Maine Aquaculture Association (MAA). The MAA is the oldest state aquaculture association in the country. We represent Maine's aquatic farmers that raise finfish, shellfish and sea vegetables. Our farmers annually produce over 100 million dollars in farm gate revenue and directly employ roughly 700 Maine citizens year-round. We purchase goods and services from over 400 Maine businesses and our total economic impact is roughly 150 million dollars annually.

I stand before you today, to testify in strong OPPOSITION to LD 1026 "An Act to Provide Mapping Services for Aquaculture Lease Siting". As it is currently drafted LD 1026 proposes to charge the newly created Maine Office of Community Affairs with the responsibility of providing technical assistance to municipalities, tribal governments and regional councils to proactively map "areas of concern" related to aquaculture siting. The proposal seems simple and why would anyone oppose any "proactive" action by government?

After polling our diverse membership, a number of serious concerns have been raised.

1. LD 1026 is a rehash of proposals that have been made several times over the last twenty years and rejected by the legislature. The use of mapping as a marine spatial planning tool has been reviewed at least 4 times by various study commissions and the conclusion has always been the same. To be effective, mapping exercises must be based on objective third party verified data and not anecdotal accounts by interested parties who have a vested interest in the outcome. LD 1026 contains no such requirement and will provide state sponsored tools to parties who have a vested interest in making "no go zones" on municipal maps as large as possible to reduce the likelihood of any successful aquaculture lease applications. Prior reviews of mapping have also concluded that the state does not have verified data at adequate scales to make mapping effective and that gathering that data would likely cost millions of dollars and encounter resistance from other marine resource users.

2. The current leasing system has numerous opportunities for members of the public and other marine resource users to have input. No other marine resource user has anywhere near the level of public and municipal scrutiny and input that aquaculture has. In addition, based on the existing leasing criteria, aquaculture is ALWAYS last in line behind any other user and the protection of the environment.
3. Once something goes on a map it becomes "truth" If an activity or feature is on the map it must be there, right? How else could it have got on the map? The presence of something on a map, particularly one entered into the lease hearing record by a municipality, shifts the burden of proof away from a person or group who would normally have to testify under oath in a hearing to the lease applicant who is then forced to prove the map is inaccurate or false. That shift in burden of proof will drive up applicants' legal costs and make lease applications prohibitively costly for small owner operators. The system will be selecting for only larger proposals that can afford the costs incurred to prove the maps inaccurate by using consultants and lawyers.
4. Once something goes on a map it rarely comes off. Our experience with seal haul outs and eelgrass beds on maps is a case in point. Even if they are no longer active or in a particular location, once they go on a map we are often told "well they were there before and you never know they might come back". The area is effectively a no go zone in perpetuity even though there is no current evidence of that activity or presence. The current proposal contains no requirement for the regular review of the maps to ensure the activity that is supposedly happening in a location actually is or if it was that it still is happening. One thing we know about the coast of Maine is that it is changing at a dramatically fast rate. Wild fish stocks are moving and other marine activities are coming and going as new residents move to coastal towns and the environment and ecosystem changes. With no requirement to verify the "data" (i.e. stories) in the first place and no requirement to regularly reexamine the maps on a regular basis, maps will become outdated and inaccurate rapidly. Town will incur significant expense to maintain accurate maps or they will allow them to become out of date and of little use.

In closing, a vote to approve LD 1026 is to make a policy decision to use state resources (staff time and agency money) to help municipalities identify no go zones for aquaculture sites. Put another way it is a decision to use public resources to substantively aid aquaculture opponents to develop tools that would be used against Maine citizens who are seeking to build local businesses and apply for leases in a process that already contains more public and municipal input than any other marine resource user and that inherently places them last in line compared to other uses. While I understand the intention of the sponsors is to try to reduce conflict they are doing so by institutionalizing and funding a mechanism that is designed to discriminate against aquaculturists. By voting to pass LD 1026 you will be sending a chilling message to all the young people along the coast who are excited to start

local businesses and continue Maine maritime heritage. Please vote OUGHT NOT TO PASS on LD 1026. Thank you for your attention, I would be glad to answer any questions you may have.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read 'S. Belle', written in a cursive style.

Sebastian M. Belle
Executive Director