



University of Maine System Testimony Regarding LD 1141, An Act to Increase the Procurement of Maine Foods by State-funded Institutions, Presented by UMS Chief External & Governmental Affairs Officer Samantha Warren, April 1, 2025

Senator Talbot Ross, Representative Pluecker, and distinguished members of the Joint Standing Committee on Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry: My name is Sam Warren and I am the Chief External & Governmental Affairs Officer for the University of Maine System (UMS).

Our System is proud to lead Maine in our commitment to locally and sustainably sourcing the food and beverages we serve on our public university campuses. In 2016, we set a bold goal that by 2020, 20% of our food spending would be local. When we surpassed that goal, **we raised the bar even higher, with a new System local food purchasing goal of 25% by 2025, which we expect to exceed.**

In FY24, through our third-party food service provider, Sodexo, **our System directly supported more than 100 Maine small businesses and invested \$2.2 million in the local food economy**, spending more than \$500,000 on both local dairy and local meat, and approximately \$350,000 on local poultry. Last fiscal year, 44% of our System's seafood spending, 41% of dairy spending, 39% of meat spending, 28% of beverage spending, and 25% of poultry spending was with local farmers and producers.

"Maine Farm Bureau and Maine farmers really appreciate the university buying locally and it's exciting that so many students are being exposed to healthy, delicious food grown so close to their campuses in our communities," Maine Farm Bureau President David Kent said last year. **"This level of large institutional investment in our Maine farms ensures they and our rural economy can thrive while also preserving open space access and our environment."**

While we support the spirit of the ambitious purchasing goals set forth in LD 1141, our experiences as one of the state's largest local food buyers have led us to have some concerns about the ability of Maine's public institutions, including UMS, to achieve 30% by 2030.

Our System's intentional decision to use distance to define "local" rather than political boundaries allows us to offer the highest quality and variety of food and drinks to our students while preventing punitive retaliation that could limit Maine producers from selling their goods in other nearby states like New Hampshire. While we prefer to invest in growing Maine's food economy, we would caution against this legislation's in-state limits for this reason.

Additionally, while new growing and preserving techniques and technology, including those innovated in partnership with the land-grant University of Maine, have increased opportunities for extending the harvest, Maine's distinctive seasons do create barriers to producing healthy, fresh food year-round, let alone that which meets institutional food safety requirements. Our own 25% goal has only been achievable through creative food planning and procurement; aggressive recruitment of farmers and distributors, including establishing a new food aggregator in northern Maine (Circle B Farms in Caribou); and the inclusion of nearby states through our 175-mile radius provision. For example, five years ago UMS and Sodexo committed to doing our part to support the revival of Maine's grain industry by doubling the number of campus menu items that include local grains and increasing our local grain purchasing by 50%. We celebrated achieving this milestone with a Battle of the Chefs event featuring Maine grains in February, at which we renewed the pledge to again double our grain purchasing in the next five years.

Finally, the Maine Department of Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry is an incredibly valued partner of our entire System, and especially our flagship, UMaine. However, we do not think it is appropriate to require a quasi-independent entity like UMS to consult with the Department on our procurement processes, nor do we support them "centralizing the control and purchase" of our local food.

Our System's local food commitment and purchasing power have opened new markets for Maine farmers and producers, provided our students with access to local, healthy, delicious food choices, kept more money in our local communities, reduced our environmental impact, and better stewarded tuition and taxpayer dollars. As Sean Smith of W.A. Bean & Sons, A fifth-generation family owned and operated Bangor butcher said, "To be able to do business with the University of Maine System has been vital to a small family business like ours. We are appreciative that Maine's public universities really value local food and that through their dining services provider, Sodexo, W.A. Bean & Sons is able to serve quality meat and food products to tens of thousands of students and employees through the System and state."

Our System has proven that institutions of all sizes and in all locations can put local food on the menu and sustain and grow jobs and opportunities for Maine's farmers and producers by doing so. While the goals proposed by LD 1141 are likely unrealistic, we generally support State policies and investments that strengthen Maine's food system infrastructure and look forward to being a resource to other public institutions as they follow our UMS lead and advance their own local procurement goals.

Thank you for your support of Maine's public universities. I look forward to taking your questions.