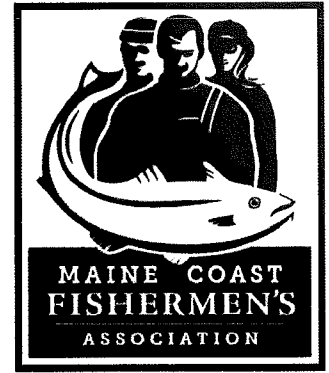


To:  
Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs  
Senator Joseph Rafferty – Chair  
Representative Kelly Murphy – Chair



**Re: LR 1659: An Act to Promote Local Seafood in Schools**

Dear Senator Rafferty, Representative Murphy, and the distinguished members of the Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs,

On behalf of the Maine Coast Fishermen's Association (MCFA), I am writing to express our **support for LR 1659: An Act to Promote Local Seafood in Schools**. MCFA is an industry-based nonprofit dedicated to restoring the fisheries of the Gulf of Maine and preserving Maine's iconic fishing communities for future generations. Founded by Maine fishermen, we work collaboratively to develop solutions for complex ecosystem, management, and community challenges. As such, we have undertaken efforts focused on sustainable seafood and believe it presents a unique opportunity to support fishermen, working waterfront businesses, and communities throughout Maine. As part of our efforts, MCFA has been actively working to create increased access for local seafood in school cafeterias.

In October 2020, in response to collapsing markets and increasing food insecurity, MCFA established our Fishermen Feeding Mainers Program. **Fishermen Feeding Mainers has delivered over 1.5 million meals to Mainers facing food insecurity and worked with roughly 350 food banks and over 60 school districts to get seafood out to our communities.** This program was funded through donations, philanthropy, and COVID relief funds, all of which have either gone away or significantly decreased over the past five years. This initiative allowed us to donate fish to schools and introduce many students to local seafood for the first time. Through our work with these schools, we identified two key issues:

1. Schools typically did not have access to local fish due to its prohibitive cost, making the Fishermen Feeding Mainers program an invaluable opportunity to provide students with an influx of local, healthy, protein.
2. Some schools lacked the capacity to cook the fish fillets and could not accept our seafood donations.

To address the second issue, MCFA has undertaken a project funded by the Kendall Foundation, USDA, and Full Plates Full Potential to develop value-added products that will make seafood more accessible for all kitchens and cafeterias in Maine. To this end, we have collaborated with partners to develop several soups (including our "Good Food Award" winning Maine Coast Monkfish Stew, made by Hurricane's Premium Soups and Chowders in Greene, Maine), and we are currently taste-testing fish cakes and seafood empanadas. Our goal is for all of these products to be self-sustaining, with Maine fishermen, Maine food producers, Maine working waterfronts, and Maine schools working together to create mutual benefit. A rising tide lifting all boats.

As you well know, the funding for schools to purchase good food presents a significant cost barrier and local seafood is expensive even when compared to other types of local produce. While the Local Foods Fund can be used to reimburse \$1 for every \$3 spent on local foods, including seafood, the higher cost of seafood creates a strong incentive to buy other local products, such as fruits and vegetables, so only a very small percentage of those funds are used on seafood purchasing. This bill represents an opportunity to grow the pie for local food purchasing in schools which is currently capped at \$5,000 per school. We want to ensure that we are not diminishing opportunities for our local farmers and other

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food producers and believe that increasing the pool of funding available for local food purchases will create more positive opportunities for our fishermen, farmers, schools, and students.

Finally, I want to emphasize the importance of seafood for our students here in Maine. In the United States, the per capita consumption of seafood is approximately 17 pounds, a number the USDA considers far too low for our collective health. Seafood is not only delicious but also highly nutritious.

- **Brain Development:** Seafood is rich in omega-3 fatty acids, which are crucial for brain development and function, especially during critical growth periods in childhood. Adequate intake can support cognitive skills, learning, and memory.
- **Overall Growth and Development:** Seafood provides high-quality protein, essential for building and repairing tissues, supporting overall growth and development in children.
- **Important Vitamins and Minerals:** Seafood is a good source of various vitamins and minerals vital for children's health, including vitamin D, vitamin B12, iodine, and zinc. These nutrients play key roles in bone health, energy production, thyroid function, and immune system support.
- **Establishes Healthy Eating Habits:** Introducing children to a variety of nutritious foods like seafood early on can help cultivate healthy eating habits that can last a lifetime.

The Dietary Guidelines for Americans, developed by the USDA, currently recommend that children consume seafood two to three times a week. Not surprisingly, the USDA has found that 94% of children and 80% of adults do not currently meet the recommendation. This program has the potential to help Maine address this issue at a local level while also helping support local fishermen and our working waterfronts.

Thank you for your time and consideration of this important bill.

Sincerely,

Ben Martens  
Executive Director

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