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Testimony of Representative Morgan Rielly presenting

LD 1845, An Act to Establish the Working Waterfront Advisory Council

Before the Joint Standing Committee on Housing and Economic Development

Good afternoon Senator Curry, Representative Gere and distinguished members of the Joint Standing Committee on Housing and Economic Development. My name is Morgan Rielly, and I represent House District 127, which includes part of Westbrook. I am here today to present **LD 1845, An Act to Establish the Working Waterfront Advisory Council**.

Over the past year, there has been a growing movement to center and address the issues facing Maine's working waterfronts – from the Governor's Infrastructure Rebuilding and Resilience Commission¹ to Maine's updated Climate Action Plan² to the Working Waterfront Coalition, and community conversations like Maine Sea Grant's Storm Response and Preparedness in Working Waterfront Communities.³

Despite the great work that these task forces, coalitions and conversations are currently accomplishing, they still don't address a key structural barrier: the ability of the Maine Legislature to engage in long-term planning. The January storms that occurred a year ago didn't just reveal the vulnerabilities of our infrastructure, they exposed a clear breakdown in communication between advocates, coastal communities and the Legislature.⁴

Our working waterfronts are in dire straights. In addition to the destruction from storms, our state is currently down to 20 miles of working waterfront out of a coastline of 5,000 miles. While we have been losing our working waterfronts to gentrification for decades, we've seen an acceleration over the past five years due to many people from out-of-state moving to our coastal and island communities.

¹ <https://www.maine.gov/future/infrastructure-commission>

² <https://www.maine.gov/climateplan/>

³ <https://seagrant.umaine.edu/workingwaterfrontstorms/>

⁴ <https://www.maine.gov/governor/mills/news/governor-mills-directs-administration-prepare-distribute-60-million-storm-relief-soon-funding>

One thing I have heard time and again in my conversations with nonprofits, communities, fishermen and aquaculturists is the need for the state to center working waterfronts as a long-term priority. With this in mind, it is evident that the Legislature needs an ongoing, Working Waterfront Advisory Council. Over the past year I have worked with the Working Waterfront Coalition and Director Horn at MOCA to craft this piece of legislation.

The council will be led by crucial members of Maine's working waterfront community, including members of the Wabanaki Nations, towns, nonprofits, trade organizations, educational institutions, individuals and industries. I believe that, with annual updates and recommendations from this council, legislators will receive the information necessary to better support our working waterfronts and make them a strategic priority, not just for our coast, but for our entire state.

The Working Waterfront Advisory Council will provide annual reports with updates and recommendations to the Legislature and to the Director of MOCA. The Director will also provide updates regarding their work with communities and coalitions. This will allow for consistency in advancing and crafting policy. Further, annual reports from those who have expertise on working waterfronts will help center them as a strategic priority for the Legislature, instead of acting only when crisis strikes.

In the early 2000s, the Legislature established a Working Waterfront Task Force in response to the dwindling points of access. One of the task force's recommendations included the creation of the Working Waterfront Access Protection Program. Imagine if that task force continued to meet and provide updates to the Legislature. I'm certain they would have flagged that our infrastructure is vulnerable to powerful and increasingly common storms and would have urged the Legislature to have made the necessary investments over the years in ensuring that they are more resilient. That didn't happen, but now we have the opportunity to be better prepared for the future.

Protecting our working waterfronts is crucial for our state's economic growth. This committee has worked to support Maine's Blue Economy. If our blue economy is silicon valley, our working waterfronts are the reliable internet access that they depend on. It needs constant maintenance and support to ensure business can thrive. Failure to protect points of access and infrastructure on our waterfronts threatens our heritage fishing industry and puts our emerging blue economy at risk.

This necessary structural change will lead to thriving working waterfronts years into the future – a fix we must make soon.

Without our working waterfronts, our state not only risks losing out on a major source of revenue, but we also risk losing a key piece of our identity. Failure to protect our working waterfronts also jeopardizes our state's long-term food and energy security. It's time the Legislature recognizes that the wellness of our working waterfronts impacts all Mainers.

Last week, Senator Curry asked, during the public hearing for **LD 1245, An Act to Create a Fund to Spread Awareness of Maine's Working Waterfronts**, what my personal story is behind putting forward that bill. That comment got me reflecting on why this issue is so important to me. As legislators, we spend our time discussing policy here at the State House, often devoid of the personal stories they are often rooted in. But for any piece of legislation I put forward, there's a personal reason behind it.

Growing up in Maine, I often found peace as a young adult by the ocean when I needed a place to think and recharge. I would watch fishermen come in and out of Mackerel Cove in Harpswell and larger cargo ships traverse Portland Harbor.

In the spring of 2022, I finished my first term in the Legislature. I was trying to figure out what I would do next. I had been accepted into UMaine Law School to attend part time while in the Legislature and had put a deposit down for the following Fall. However, I found myself dreading starting law school. I was also grappling with the stresses as a freshman legislator in my then early twenties and I desperately needed something that would replenish my soul.

While on my way back home from the State House, I had pulled off the highway to stop in Harpswell by Mackerel Cove. I watched fishermen coming back, reflected on my first two years in the Legislature and thought about what would make me happy. In college, I rowed for Bowdoin on the New Meadows River. It's my favorite place in Maine –filled with lobstermen, clam diggers and oyster farmers. A former coach, Ben Hamilton, left to start an oyster farm during my senior year. Sitting at a picnic table by the water, I reached out to him to see if he needed any help on his farm. Several weeks later, I was out on Ben's skiff-passing Bustins Island and going through the Goslings to his farm on Upper Goose in Harpswell.

Working on the water has been an incredible opportunity to find meaningful work that has connected me with nature's bounty and beauty. There is no better feeling, and no better way to end a good day than breathing in the smell of ocean-salted air, a little mud on your sleeves, surrounded by people who you enjoy and knowing the food you harvest will nourish your community. And I want to thank the guys I used to work with: Ben, Cameron, Doug, Dan, Chris, Jesse, Derek, Tyler and Cam for introducing and welcoming me to this world.

I come from a lobster fishing family on my mother's side and a farming family on my father's side. Oyster farming compliments both of those heritages. When my maternal great-grandfather retired from lobster fishing there was no one to take it up. My paternal grandfather had to sell the farm in Wisconsin and headed east to Maine. I spent many summers growing up visiting the farm my family once owned with my grandfather. Whenever we drove down the road passing cornfields and cow pastures, the old family farm growing distant in the rear seat window, I remember seeing pain in his eyes. Looking back, I'm sure he was playing in his head alternate scenarios where he still called the farm home.

I don't want working waterfront families to be something purely of fading memories that are passed down and become a piece of family lore like in mine. My fear is that, in the future, an aging former oyster farmer will take their grandchildren to point out where docks once stood that were dismantled and never rebuilt after increasingly powerful storms or where fishing communities once thrived that are now developed into high-end restaurants and seaside condos for people who will never know the joy of working on the water or the stories of those who did.

So, that is the personal reason I have spent the past year working on this piece of legislation. Because it's time the Legislature centers our working waterfronts as a top priority. Because when we lose them, we don't just lose a key piece of our economy. We lose a part of our identity.

Thank you very much for your time and consideration. I would be happy to answer any questions or to provide you with any information for your upcoming work session.