



HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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Senator Baldacci, Representative Salisbury, Distinguished Colleagues on the State and Local Government Committee:

My name is Will Tuell. I represent central Washington County in the 132nd Maine Legislature, and am here today to present LD 2069, **“An Act Designating July 21 as Maine Commercial Fishing Remembrance Day.”** I do so as a lifelong resident of Washington County who has watched scallopers, lobstermen, clam diggers, and other commercial fishermen lose their lives while earning a living at sea.

Some lost their lives in the dead of winter, navigating rough seas, howling winds, and driving rain and snow just to bring their catch, or their boat, safely to harbor. Some went out to dig clams on an early spring morning never to return home to their loved ones. And others got caught up in their boat’s rigging and went overboard on placid summer days when their friends and neighbors were going to Little League games, cookouts, or spending the weekend at camp.

Such was the case on July 21, 2023 when Tylar Michaud of Steuben went overboard while hauling lobster traps in the Moosabec region. Tylar was 18, a graduate of Sumner High School in the Hancock County town of Sullivan who graduated weeks before and had plans of attending school at Maine Maritime.

His aunt, Liz, is with us today on Zoom, and is the driving force behind this bill. She can tell her story better than I, but I can tell you that her family held an excruciating weeks-long search for Tylar’s remains. They were joined by our Marine Patrol – including Liz’s son Alex who moved to Maine to become a Marine Patrol officer several years before – first responders across the state, and local fishermen who wanted closure.

Liz’s mother, the Honorable Joyce Maker of Calais, who served in the House six years and two years in the Senate, is a close personal friend of mine. One of those friends you make up here that you just stay in touch with whether you’re in office or not. So I knew the anguish the family was going through and kept them in my prayers throughout the whole ordeal.

Tylar's story is not unique. Several years before, a young man who married a girl from my neighborhood also went overboard. Last year, four commercial fishermen from Washington County lost their lives at sea.

In all cases, the tight knit communities of coastal Washington County came together, helped not just with search, rescue, and ultimately recovery efforts, but donated tens of thousands of dollars to help the families with lost loved ones carry on.

That is right and just, but it is not enough. Liz channeled her grief into action and formed a nonprofit to advocate for fishermen's safety early last year known as Green and White Hope. Green and white were the colors of Tylar's buoys.

Last spring, Liz reached out to the Chief Executive's Office, asking if Governor Mills would proclaim July 21 Lost Fisherman's Remembrance Day. The Chief Executive did so, making Maine only the second state in the country to have done such a thing.

As admirable as Gov. Mills action was, Liz or someone else would have to come back every year for the same proclamation. When asked to attend a ceremony remembering those lost at sea Liz had organized for July 21, I responded that I would be honored to do so and that I would also be willing to sponsor a bill to make the designation permanent.

Many of you likely read of the controversy that ceremony generated – not for anything Liz had done – but because two fishermen's names who lost their lives at sea were wrongfully left off a local monument in Lubec to honor all lost fishermen.

Liz and many others in the greater fishing community rallied for the lost fishermen, decisions were reversed, and the names of Chester and Aaron Barrett were added to the monument. Hundreds attended the ceremony in Lubec and paid their respects for all fishermen who lost their lives at sea.

I only bring this controversy up because it speaks to the importance of remembering our fishermen. If Liz had not approached the Governor, July 21 would have come and gone like any other day, yet because of it people were having difficult conversations about honoring those they had lost.

Those conversations while hard and sometimes negative, brought to the surface emotions that many in our small coastal communities buried – some for decades, others for generations. The need for a day for Mainers to honor our lost fishermen was, and is, more critical than ever.

It's more critical because we can't have conversations about safety, well-being, and awareness without remembering those who were lost, saying to the community that it is okay to grieve, to strive for something better, and to assure families that their loved one will always be remembered.

I am not proposing to make July 21 a paid state holiday. Much like your pancreatic cancer designation bill and others, this is an opportunity to educate, observe, and remember. I know Liz will have another ceremony this year, and maybe others up and down the coast will do the same. Those ceremonies will help communities ravaged by loss and despair heal, they will help fishermen accept their own mortality, and will help our state acknowledge that our billion dollar seafood industry is not just about dollars, cents, catch limits and quotas, it's about the people that live a way of life that means a lot to our state.

I thank you for the opportunity to present this bill here today and ask for your unanimous support at work session, and would be happy to entertain any questions.