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Testimony in Support of

LD 2144– Resolve, to Establish the Working Group to Prioritize Wellness and Mental Health Resources for Heritage Industries.

Good afternoon, Senator Ingwerson, Representative Meyer and distinguished members of the Health and Human Services Committee. I am Representative Tiffany Strout from Harrington, representing the towns of Milbridge, Harrington, Columbia, Columbia Falls, Centerville, Addison, Jonesport, Beals, Jonesboro, Roque Bluffs, Whitneyville and Machias in beautiful Washington County and I am here today to express my support for – **LD 2144– Resolve, to Establish the Working Group to Prioritize Wellness and Mental Health Resources for Heritage Industries.**

Growing up in DownEast Maine, I have witnessed firsthand the importance of heritage industries, in fact, they are what keeps Washington County going, seasonally. I grew up knowing when one season ended, you prepared for the next. Summer was harvesting blueberries and gardens. In the mid-fall after the first cold snap, you would harvest brush to make wreaths and people would move to the woods to gather firewood for the following year or truck logs to a mill for processing. Clammers were on the shores year round if it wasn't too hot on the flats or covered with ice. Fishermen followed various species to harvest which included lobsters, crabs, shrimp and ground fish. Heritage industries have been and remain the fiber of our communities.

Here are just a few examples of the impacts:

In January 2023, the Seafood Economic Accelerator (SEA) of Maine published *The Economic Impacts of the Maine Seafood Sector* report from data collected in 2019. The report shows the impact of the industry coast wide, but specifically focusing on my area, the report showed the industry was contributing over \$960 million in economic output which is **14% of our total economic output**. This industry supports over 10,900 jobs which is estimated to contribute roughly two-thirds of total labor income. The DownEast seafood sector supports considerably more jobs than Southern Maine, despite having less than one-fifth of the population.

DownEast is the Wild Blueberry capital of the world even though wild blueberries do grow in other parts of the state. A study done in 2009 by the University of Maine Cooperative shows the wild blueberry industry contributed to approximately 2,540 jobs, with approximately 300 being year-round and contributed approximately \$63 million in personal income including income to the Passamaquoddy Tribes who own and process blueberry fields.

Wood harvesting and wreath making are two industries that are harder to quantify the impact because in both industries are able to be done as self-employed individuals. People can harvest their own timber for their own use, as firewood or ship to a mill for processing. The same is true for wreath making. You can harvest your

own brush and make the wreaths to share with your neighbors or sell on the internet. There are, however, 2 big contributors to the industries in Washington County. Woodland Pulp LLC which is the largest year-round employer in Washington County and Worcester Holdings which ships wreaths and balsam products as well as has the contract for Wreaths Across America who placed over 3.1 million wreaths on Veterans graves in 2025.

You may be asking yourself, what does this information have to do with this bill? I would say... everything. The heritage industries are Maine. These jobs are all physical manual labor careers. The people that work in them are not just doing a job, but rather, carrying on a tradition and pride in contributing to their communities. They create a work ethic where you want to continue to do well and provide for your family and community. With the seasonal changes and the uncertainties there comes a lot of stress and sometimes less time to think about yourself, your health or the impact your time away and stress has on your family.

With heritage industries there are no breaks, you are always thinking about the next haul, the weather, the cost and the regulations. You are always living in the unexpected and a *wait and see* environment. Your livelihood is determined mostly by people who have never done your work and have no idea how much you care for the industry and the personal investment you must make sure not only you are able to be successful, but future generations. All these uncertainties and pressures will sometimes take a toll on a person's mental health.

In my opinion, there are two major contributors impacting mental health in the heritage industries, Mother Nature and Government. The world is ever evolving and changes in climate will always be unpredictable, and humans can have little impact on how it changes, but those in the industry can learn how to work with the changes as they have for more than 100 years. The government, however, is something that is more unpredictable and more impactful on the industries. Regulations and law changes could come at the change of administration or the push for a political agenda. Some environmental measures seen as helpful may actually cause more long-term damage. What really becomes difficult is when you must deal with natural and governmental change at the same time.

You may be thinking, this is great for a working group to discuss, and I hope that these are some topics that are discussed, but I think to have a successful working group, education about some of the mental health creation and why the need is important.

Mental health has unfortunately become something that people do not want to talk about or seek help for treatment. There are many things that play into mental health including funding to make sure people have equal access to services. Working in an ever-changing environment and seasonal industries that you take on, the responsibility for many things and sometimes you, the person, becomes the last priority. When people are working for you, you also want to make sure their families are cared for, as an example.

As I mentioned above, I know a little about these industries. I grew up watching my great grandparents run a crew of blueberry rakers and then began raking when I was 9, I made wreaths in high school and now my husband is a subcontractor to harvest blueberries, and my son is a first-generation lobsterman. I can speak firsthand on the stress my family sees from a too rainy May when the bees will not pollinate to a drought in August causing the berries to dry up and not be able to be harvested, to government regulation on traps and gear to tariffs on needed equipment for the harvesters you can only get from Canada.

As a mom, I have watched my son learn the industry and work his best to make a living. I see him struggle with the uncertainty of future regulations and the possible ramifications if he has to modify his gear after everything is set for the season, or considers if the government will implement something that makes the job more dangerous like weak links in the rope that snaps when hauling.

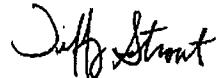
One of the major mental health crises recently in my community has been the death of 5 fishermen in 3 short years, 4 in 2025 alone. These losses affect both the entire local and wider communities. These communities can relate to what it feels like losing a son, husband, brother or father.

Mental health cannot be solved with one bill or one working group. It extends through many jobs, roles, education and commitment but those who want to help and those who need the help. In closing, I hope this bill will do more than just look for a financial way to help those struggling. My hope is that those on this working

group will really take a look at the industry pressures created by outside influences, the opportunity to educate people on how important these industries are, not only to the economy, but the mental health of so many who want their heritage to continue so they can share stories about their families for generations to come after them and to start to break down the negative stigma associated with seeking mental health assistance.

Thank you for your time today and I would be happy to answer any questions.

Sincerely,



Tiffany Strout
State Representative