



HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
2 STATE HOUSE STATION
AUGUSTA, MAINE 04333-0002
(207) 287-1400
TTY: MAINE RELAY 711

Allison Hepler

Phone: (207) 319-4396

Allison.Hepler@legislature.maine.gov

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*Testimony of Rep. Allison Hepler in support of
LD 2144, Resolve, to Establish the Working Group to Prioritize Wellness and
Mental Health Resources for Heritage Industries
Before the Joint Standing Committee on Health and Human Services*

Good afternoon, Senator Ingwersen, Representative Meyer, and members of the Health and Human Services Committee. I am Allison Hepler and I represent the towns of Arrowsic, Georgetown, Phippsburg, West Bath and Woolwich. I am here today to speak in support of **LD 2144, Resolve, to Establish the Working Group to Prioritize Wellness and Mental Health Resources for Heritage Industries.**

I support this bill from a number of different angles – as a historian, as a representative of several coastal communities, as a member or former member of three of our natural resources legislative committees. This is what I am not: an expert on wellness or mental health. Fortunately, you will hear from many who are.

I taught Maine history for many years at the University of Maine at Farmington (UMF). One of the facets of Maine history that stands out is its resource-based economy. Working in the woods, farming, and fishing predate the arrival of Europeans to these shores. Today, I don't need to tell you how important these industries are to Maine's livelihood and identity.

When your workplace is outside and the resource you're exploiting depends on the natural elements, there are a few things to keep in mind: too much water or water at the wrong time, too much heat and sunshine or not enough at the right time, accessing the resource at the right time and finding enough of it to make a living are all vital considerations. To state the obvious, to a large extent you are at the mercy of weather.

Why do it? Especially in the farming and fishing industries, it's the independence. It's the ability to be make a living on your own, on your own schedule and not punching a clock. You are your own boss. You get to be outside in this beautiful state and engage with nature on a regular basis.

The challenges: being your own boss requires a lot of decision making, and in the case of fishing, those decisions can be life or death – can I make it out there to haul traps and get back or should I stay and fix my wonky electronic winch? Or, patch my questionable boots or foul weather gear? How bad will that storm be? How much do I need to do to make my mortgage this

month? Finally, the flip side of the independence that is so appealing is that it is also a solitary activity.

For farmers, both the appeal and the challenges are much the same. They also face market forces they cannot control. In our Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry Committee, for instance, we watch dairy farmers struggle to care for their animals while trying to make a living for their family, and then national and international decisions might make you simply throw away your business plan. In the marine fisheries world, we see the same uncertainty, with a large number of federal regulations.

While many in these industries face financial, family, and health decisions similar to many of us, those in our resource economies face them alone. And let's face it, the independence of this work, which is part of its appeal, also brings pride. And pride can bring a reluctance to reach out for help.

Help exists in this state. There are amazing nonprofits and community agencies who are so valuable in helping our communities thrive. Many are here today.

So, what's the value of this Resolve? What can the state do? This working group, with input from these organizations, can collect data to identify gaps in what is already happening. This is not the time to reinvent the wheel. This working group can identify sustainable funding sources and should provide opportunities for public education. We all know that a stigma still exists around mental health. Let's break that. Let's acknowledge the very real challenges of those who put food on our table and those who source the materials to provide our shelter.

Thank you for your time and I'd be happy to answer any questions I can.