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TESTIMONY BEFORE THE HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES COMMITTEE

IN SUPPORT OF LD 2144

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

January 28, 2026

Senator Ingwersen, Representative Meyer, and members of the Committee on Health and Human Services. My name is Emily Horton, I am the Director of Policy and Community Engagement at the Maine Department of Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry (DACF). I am testifying in support of LD 2144, *Resolve to Establish the Working Group to Prioritize Wellness and Mental Health Resources for Heritage Industries*.

Last week, I spoke with a farmer facing compounding challenges. He had lost one of his major markets, and his crop this summer was severely impacted by ongoing drought—this on top of significant losses from the winter storms in 2023 and 2024. He's unable to take on any additional debt. In addition to connecting him with resources DACF could offer, including grants and technical assistance, I shared our mental health resources page. However, I left that conversation feeling it wasn't enough. We can and should do more.

Maine's heritage industries—agriculture, forestry, logging, and fishing—are the backbone of our state's economy and culture. Yet the individuals and families who sustain these industries face extraordinary and often overlooked mental and physical health challenges. Recent data from a regional survey conducted by the University of Maine Cooperative Extension shows that 61% of workers in these sectors have identified the need for increased public education and access to culturally competent health services. This is not a minor concern—these industries consistently rank among occupation groups with the highest suicide rates in the nation¹.

The robust turnout at Maine's first Land and Sea Farmer Wellness Forum in September 2025, demonstrates that our agricultural and natural resource communities see the need for support and attention on the issues of mental health and wellness in our heritage industries.

¹ Suicide Rates by Industry and Occupation — National Vital Statistics System, United States, 2021 | MMWR

This working group will help us to:

- Review and strengthen existing healthcare resources
- Identify and address critical gaps in service delivery
- Learn from proven successful models in other states
- Develop sustainable, dedicated funding mechanisms tailored to our heritage industries
- Reduce stigma through targeted public education

As one of the three co-chairing agencies, the Department of Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry is firmly committed to working collaboratively with the Department of Marine Resources, the Department of Health and Human Services, and the diverse stakeholders outlined in this resolve, alongside the legislature, to advance this critical work.

The December 1, 2026, reporting deadline provides sufficient time for meaningful engagement while allowing the 133rd Legislature to act on our recommendations.

We strongly urge you to support this Resolve. The health of our heritage industries and the well-being of our rural communities are essential to Maine's future.

Thank you for your consideration.