

28 January 2026

132nd Maine Legislature's Committee On Health and Human Services

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

Chair Ingwersen, Chair Meyer and esteemed members of the Committee on Health and Human Services,

My name is Jenni Tilton-Flood and I am an owner and manager at Flood Brothers, LLC, a family dairy farm in Clinton, also known as Maine's Dairy Capital. Our multigenerational farm is currently operated and owned by 4 generations of our family comprised of 17 family members and 6 households. Our operation is home to 4,200 cows. Along with the skills and expertise of 44 team members 2,200 of our herd are milked everyday, producing 18,000 gallons of milk each and every day which finds its way onto our neighbors' tables within 24-48 hours after leaving the farm. We steward thousands of acres of land, both owned and rented,

in three counties including the original farm, which has been situated along the banks of Kennebec and in the family for over two centuries. As a part of Maine agriculture our farm is an integral component of the food system providing fresh, high quality food and sustainable nutrition and an economic impact for our State. Our farm, like the broader food system, agricultural and heritage industries of the state truly affect the triple bottom line of sustainability here in Maine: community, environment and economy. Because of all of this it is important to our business, the food system, and my family that the people who power these heritage industries are cared for and invested in through meaningful and impactful policies and programs. LD2144 Resolve, to Establish the Working Group to Prioritize Wellness and Mental Health Resources for Heritage Industries is the meaningful and impactful pathway to those programs and policies that support and provide care and I urge you to vote OTP.

I am a dairy farmer, a mother, and the former John Deere parts girl. Every aspect of my way of life and the ways I have made a living has and is about caring for animals and people...and like many in rural communities and in heritage industries that care is often provided in lonely settings that are isolated, burdened by economic hardship, and involve carrying the heavy baggage of guilt and stubbornness that in no way empowers you to overcome stigma and distance and barriers to not just seeking care but to accepting it. I have the honour and distinction to have raised two children on our family farm and each of those strong willed, feisty farm kids have chosen to stay or to return to Maine to be a part of our food system. One is a dairy farmer with us and the other a practicing DVM who helps provide care for other farmers in Maine. They chose what they loved and worked hard to find their way and have succeeded in not only making us proud but also by joining two of the most crucial career fields to our food system as well as two occupations that see some of the highest rates of suicide. So yes, this is a very personal ask for me but it is also a community ask, because our communities are built upon our heritage industries.

And it is important to remember and include the service providers of our heritage industries, who themselves are often overworked, over stressed, and under supported. Not only are their careers high in stress and risk for negative health outcomes but they are often the ones shoring up we farmers, fishers, and foresters. They are the ones who witness the decline and the despair and they are the ones tasked with delivering the worst news. They are the ones who are depended upon to support the farmer in the worst of times, but for whom there is no support. Heritage Industries are not a singular entity but a community and our wider community bears the brunt of some of the most brutal moments and events. Here in Maine and throughout the country there are field reps, sales people, vets, nutritionists, consultants, mechanics, and even parts girls who are the confidants of the farmer. Seeing the choices made to ensure the cows are fed, the fields tended, and the work done. I cannot count the number of these professionals and amazing humans who have told me of their fear of arriving at the barn to find their client/customer/friend has taken their life knowing that they would be found by someone other than family. I cannot count the number of times I have

watched these amazing folks show up while the flames are still burning bright and work to pick up the pieces. These folks carry their work and care home with them and while they are wonderful providers of support we must make sure to include them, but not to overlook the burdens they bear or the support they too need, nor add on to their duties unfairly.

It is difficult to explain why it is so difficult for those in Heritage Industries to acknowledge the need, seek, find and accept care. It is hard to explain this all to someone who is not one of the less than 2% who actively engaged in agriculture. It is difficult to explain to someone that even though your farm family is dealing with 6 deaths of members of the farm community and team, and family members over a 24 month period, including 1 the result of suicide and another the result of addiction and despair, and you yourself are dealing with the death of 4 members of your family, 1 of which was the result of suicide, and the milk price is tanking and the weather is not cooperating that the cows still have to be fed and milked, and the fields nourished and crops tended and harvested and that while you may be able to work in some time to grieve you really can't figure out how to care for your herd- the human herd and the cow herd. You don't know how to make sure they are okay, you don't know how to make sure they know they will be okay and nobody else knows either. It's really hard to explain all that. Because this world wasn't set up to understand that. And our Heritage Industries have not done a very good job of saying that we can't go on like this. Far too often we just tell ourselves and each other that this is just the way it is. And so the cows get milked and the logs roll into the mill, and the traps get pulled...until they don't because it really is too much for anyone...even a farmer, a logger or a fisher.

As a member of the Maine farming community I see each and every day how vulnerable some of the most stoic and hardworking people are to health challenges, both physical and mental. The lack of access, availability and affordability of care that meets us where we are is debilitating and corrosive to the very foundation of our working lands and waterfronts. It is not simply that the hours are long and the work hard; it is not simply that the milk check doesn't make ends meet; it is not even that most of the work, the living, the dying, the ups and downs are done in isolation...it is all of that and more combined with the uniqueness of

the job description and the limitations of resources that were never designed to meet the needs of heritage industries. This working group would lay bare the needs and those limitations and gather the needed information to provide working solutions to the folks that make Maine work.

I think back to the sound of the bullets being removed from the chamber and put in my outstretched hand. I think back to the day I climbed up into the tractor and sat in the buddy seat to let someone know that I knew what they were planning and I needed them to be a part of all of the tomorrows. I think back to the frantic communications and calls from all over the country from people who were scared and did not know what to do about the farmer who had posted a goodbye and no one could reach them. I am thankful that in each of those instances I had access to a framework to rely upon, whether it be QPR Suicide Prevention Training, programs in other states such as NYNet, or the resources stood up by my farmer owned cooperative when they were no longer willing to sit by and see another farmer take their life. I think of all this. And I hope...I truly hope that in Maine we will have the framework and resources that don't just provide help in time of crisis but create a community of care that results in prevention.

We often talk about how good food comes from a good place, and the intent and efforts of this proposed work study would ensure that our good Maine food does indeed come from a place of well being and goodness.

I strongly urge you to vote in favour of LD 2144. I also thank you for serving as citizen legislators and welcome any questions you may have for me about our farm and the importance of meeting the needs of mental well being and health throughout our food systems and heritage industries.

With Gratitude,
Jenni Tilton-Flood
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