



February 5, 2026

The Honorable Denise Tepler, Senate Chair  
The Honorable Allison Hepler, House Chair  
Joint Standing Committee on Marine Resources  
State House, Room 202  
Augusta, ME. 04333

Senator Tepler, Representative Hepler, Honorable members of the Joint Committee on Marine Resources:

My name is Sebastian Belle and I am the Executive Director of the Maine Aquaculture Association (MAA). The MAA is the oldest state aquaculture association in the country. Next year will be our fiftieth anniversary. We are a volunteer nonprofit membership association who represent Maine's aquatic farmers that raise finfish, shellfish and sea vegetables. Our board of directors is selected to represent the diversity of the aquaculture sector in terms of species, production method and company size. The latest economic impact analysis shows that our farmers annually produce over 106 million dollars in farm gate revenue and directly employ 1207 Maine citizens. We purchase goods and services from over 400 Maine businesses and create 1720 jobs in the state. Our total economic impact is roughly 208 million dollars annually.

I stand before you today to testify in strong support of LD 2025 "An Act to Create a Limited-purpose License for Aquaculture Nursery and Husbandry Activities and to Clarify the Aquaculture Lease Amendment Process".

Let me begin by saying that LD2025 does NOT loosen any regulations or reduce any oversight by the Department of Marine Resources. On the contrary it increases the regulatory control the state has over Maines aquatic farmers. You may hear from some farmers that they object to the bill because of that. From the association's perspective we have always supported rigorous and fair regulations that protect the public trust and the environment and provide regulatory predictability to Maines working waterfront community. LD 2025 achieves that balance.

LD 2025 is in response to a policy change by DMR in 2024 that required aquaculture lease holders to seek amendments for changes in equipment or operations that were relatively small and that had been historically allowed by DMR without lease amendments. LD 2025 is the result of approximately a years' worth of work by the Aquaculture Advisory Council in collaboration with DMR. I would like to thank the advisory council for all the time and effort they put into developing the concepts embodied in LD 2025. I would also like to thank the department for it's recognition of the problem and its work with the advisory council to develop a solution. While the grower community supports LD 2025 we have a few suggestions to help ensure it achieves what it intends to.

- a. 6072-E The new license created by LD2025 is based on the approval by the DMR of specific activities and/or gear. While LD 2025 clarifies the amendment process for a lease it does not specify whether the newly created license will allow for changes in nursery and/or husbandry practices. These activities are constantly evolving and the new license must include a clear process that allows DMR to be aware of those changes but not inhibit innovation. If this is clarified during rulemaking the license must allow for quick changes and not be required for minor changes or the license will be just another regulatory layer that growers have to wade through and that inhibits innovation.
- b. 6072-E (6) The six month duration is too short for some species and should be extended for some species to one year.
- c. 6072-E (12)A The Restitution clause only allows a leaseholder to claim the value of the gear that is molested NOT the value of the animals or plants that gear contained. The value of those animals or plants is often much larger than the gear itself and their loss has devastating impacts on a farms future revenue stream. The value of those animals and/or plants should be included in the restitution clause.
- d. 6072-F would benefit from a clarification of the difference between “gear” and “equipment”. The bill should include clear definitions of these terms.
- e. LD 2025 gives the DMR authority to promulgate rules that may allow changes in nursery and husbandry practices and gear evolutions on lease sites to occur in a regulated and timely manner. As always the devil is in the details and the specifics of the rules promulgated by DMR will determine whether the rules will allow the efficient adoption of innovative solutions by the aquaculture sector in a timely and fair manner. To ensure the rules promulgated by DMR achieve the intent of LD 2025 The Legislatures Marine Resources Committee should direct the department to work closely with the Aquaculture Advisory Committee (AAC) in the development of rules designed to enact LD2025. The AAC should be given the draft proposed rules for review and comment BEFORE they go to public comment.

Finally, and MOST importantly the DMR is proposing some amendments to LD2025, one of which would give the agencies aquaculture inspection staff the authority to inspect a lease site without prior notice and collect samples without the lease holder's permission. Let me be clear we have NO issue with the need for DMR to inspect aquaculture lease sites. However, although a lease holder operates in public waters the plants and animals they grow are privately owned and the property of the leaseholder. DMR is asking for authority to execute a warrantless search and seizures which is a violation of the United States constitution and this amendment should be rejected by the legislature. To my knowledge no leaseholder has ever refused the departments request to visit and inspect a site or their request for samples. The amendment is unnecessary and a clear violation of a leaseholders rights.

Aquaculture in Maine has grown slowly but steadily over the last 10 years. Our total economic impact has grown from \$137 million to over \$208 million and the numbers of jobs we create has grown from 1000 to over 1700. We are no longer the “new” kids on the block. We are the second most valuable fishery in the state. Maine aquaculture's direct impact of \$106 million makes up 69% of seafood value in Maine that is not lobster. In other words, following lobster, the majority of seafood from Maine, by value, is raised on Maine's aquaculture farms. We appreciate all the work this committee has done to ensure we continue to grow while protecting the public trust and

environment. We ask that you Vote **Ought to Pass** on LD 2025 while rejecting the amendment regarding inspection authority that constitutes a warrantless search and seizure.

Thank you for your attention, I would be glad to answer any questions you may have.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'S. Belle', written in a cursive style.

Sebastian M. Belle  
Executive Director

# Public Perceptions of Aquaculture (2024)

The Critical Insights on Maine tracking survey, conducted by Digital Research, Inc., is a long-standing public opinion poll of registered Maine voters, providing insights on a variety of topics for over 25 years. The Fall 2024 survey gathered responses from 604 participants via phone and online, ensuring a representative sample reflective of Maine's voting population. Results specific to the Maine aquaculture sector were drawn from proprietary questions included in the survey and have a margin of error of  $\pm 4.0$  percentage points at a 95% confidence level.



## Of Mainers familiar enough with aquaculture to rate their support:

**89%** believe aquaculture can play a role in **strengthening Maine's working waterfronts.**



**89%** believe aquaculture can play a role in **diversifying Maine's coastal and rural economies.**



**85%** believe Maine aquaculture is an **important and valuable** part of the **local food system.**



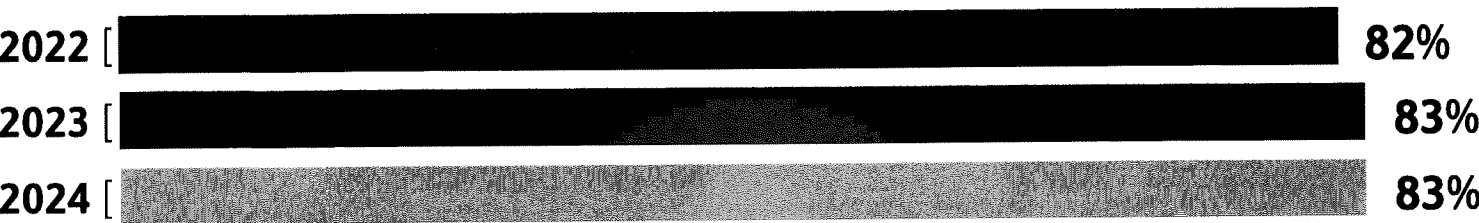
**82%** believe aquaculture products are **sustainable and environmentally responsible.**



**73%** believe Maine aquaculture products are **delicious.**



Year after year, support for the growth of aquaculture has remained strong. Consistently, **8 in 10 Mainers** familiar with aquaculture support the growth of the sector:



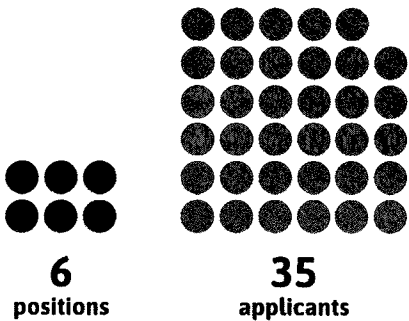
Results reflect that **better understanding of the industry** is directly correlated with higher **support for the industry.** This highlights the importance of **proper education** and **outreach.**

# Maine Aquaculture Apprenticeship

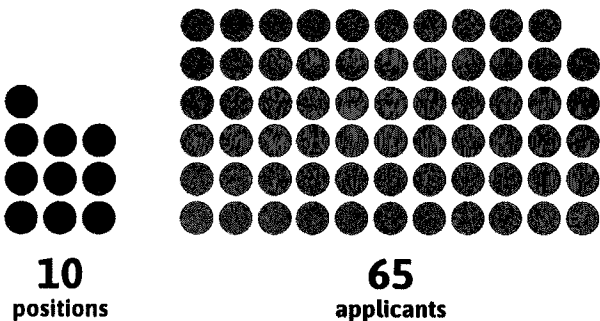
The Maine Shellfish and Seaweed Technician registered apprenticeship is a year-long program offering paid, full-time positions, including 2,000 hours of on-farm training and 144 hours of coursework, preparing participants for long-term careers in Maine's aquaculture sector. It was launched in 2023 and has attracted many applicants from across the nation. It is the first aquaculture apprenticeship in the nation.

● = Available Positions      ● = Applicants

## 2023 Apprentice Cohort

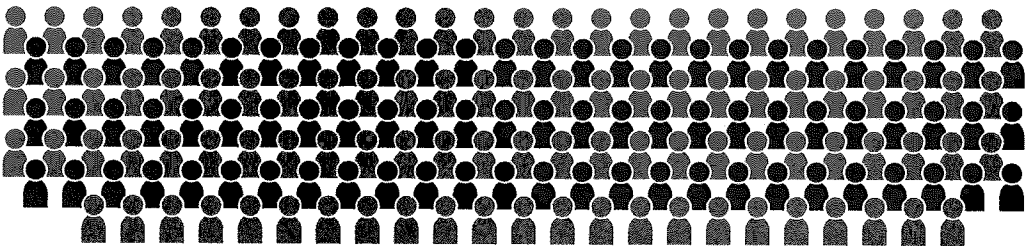


## 2024 Apprentice Cohort



# Aquaculture as Diversification

Aquaculture is a growing opportunity for Maine's working waterfronts, helping fishermen diversify their incomes while staying connected to the water. As traditional fisheries face increased challenges from climate change, rising costs, and gentrification in coastal communities, aquaculture offers a sustainable solution that bolsters the resilience of our working waterfronts. With more fishermen recognizing the potential of aquaculture, we can strengthen Maine's working waterfronts and secure the future of our maritime economy.



**179 Mainers\***  
hold both a commercial  
fishing license and  
an aquaculture license

\*does not include fishermen employed on farms or farm employees who also fish

# Economic Impact of Aquaculture

Growth in Maine's aquaculture sector creates new jobs and career opportunities, boosts the state's economy and seafood brand, and attracts new businesses to our working waterfronts.

## Total Economic Impact

Total impact is the combination of business revenues, business spending, and employee spending driven by aquaculture



## Total Employment Impact

Total employment impact includes direct farm jobs, jobs related to aquaculture services (e.g. insurance, equipment, tourism) and related to needs of employees (e.g. health care, restaurants, real estate, etc.).



for more info, visit us at [www.maineaqua.org](http://www.maineaqua.org)